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YOUNG MR. NIGHTINGALE.

VOL. III.



# YOUNG MR. NIGHTINGALE.

A NOVEL.

BY

DUTTON COOK,

*Author of "Hobson's Choice," "Over Head and Ears," "Paul Foster's Daughter," etc.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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VOL. III.

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Inscribed  
to  
Cinda.



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# YOUNG MR. NIGHTINGALE.

## CHAPTER I.

MISS DARLINGTON.

“AND you’re Duke! To think of that! The boy that saw me dance at the fair. What an age ago it seems! The boy that found me in the snow and saved my life! For you did that; I’m sure about it now, and grateful enough for it, though I wasn’t then, perhaps. But you’re no longer a boy; quite a man grown, I declare, with hair upon your face. Can you blush still as you used to? I see you can. My old friend Duke! Who would have thought of our meeting again, here, at Sir George’s? I’d forgotten your name was Nightingale. I never thought of you but as Duke, simply Duke—my Duke!”

“You have thought of me then, Rosetta?” I

could not call her by her new name of Miss Darlington. Still less could I address her as Lady Overbury.

"Thought of you? Of course I have; often and often."

"And kindly, I am sure, Rosetta."

"You may be sure, my dear," she said, simply. "How could I think of you but kindly? You loved me, didn't you? for half an hour; or was it longer. And for five minutes or so I fancied—I almost fancied—I really loved you again. You seemed so brave, and true, and fond, and foolish, it did me good to think of you. You lost your heart—in the snow, wasn't it? But you found it again, before the snow had melted. Hearts are soon lost and soon found again. Or, when we lose one, another quickly grows in its place. Still it was something to be loved as you loved me, my Duke, although it didn't, couldn't last. After all, perhaps, the things that don't last are the pleasantest. I'm very glad to see you again, old friend. For we're friends still; we must be friends, anyhow. Such a world of things has happened since I've seen you, I can't begin to speak of them now, or I shall never stop. But I'm no longer Rosetta. Forget the tight-jeff—I do, at least I try to; though some-

times if the band struck up the right tune I really think I should begin looking for my balancing-pole, and jiggling about again just in the old way. But I'm now Miss Rose Darlington of the Theatre Royal Haymarket. And, my dear, I'm engaged for the winter season at Covent Garden. Think of that ! And Sir George Nightingale—what relation is he of yours ? Uncle ? Well, your cousin let us say—the great and grand Sir George, asked permission to paint my portrait. Only fancy his asking my permission ! My dear, I was ready to sink into the ground with shame and confusion. His politeness was quite killing. It was so keen, and cold, and polished, it seemed to run through me like a small sword. Of course I consented. What could I do but consent ? And then he smiled upon me. And he looks wonderfully handsome when he smiles. You're my old friend, my Duke, and I like your face, and you've grown what's called a nice young man ; but, my dear, you're a fool to your cousin, so far as good looks are concerned. And so I'm sitting for my picture to Sir George. And what do you think of it ? He's flattered me, hasn't he ? They say he always flatters."

I declared that the painter had not flattered her in the least ; that I thought the picture wonderfully



like. This was in truth my opinion, and I did not hesitate to express it, although I saw that Mole was standing by, arching his brows with an odd look of mocking incredulity and amazement.

"You really think so? You know I can't tell, myself, how I look. Of course, that's only a fancy dress. I've never been 'on' quite like that. But surely I'm not so tall as he's made me."

I said that posed as she was in the picture, at the top of a flight of steps, the effect would probably be that she would seem taller than she really was.

"He's given you about three inches extra height," said Mole, in rather a sarcastic tone. "About three inches; not more. A mere trifle. It's what we call poetic license."

"I think it's too tall," she said. "But I wouldn't for the world say so to Sir George. He must have his own way of course; and if he likes to make an Irish giantess of me I can't help it. He's made me very good-looking, anyhow. And I know I'm that. At least I know the audience think me so, and that's all I care about. My dear, such a round of applause as they give me when I come on and make my curtsy to them! It sets me

tingling all over with pleasure, and I'd do anything I could to content them."

"You're a novelty, you see," said Mole, "and the public's fond of novelty."

"Well, I'll try and keep them fond of me after I've ceased to be a novelty. Anyhow, they've been very good to me as yet, and I owe them much, very much. I've not a word to say against them."

"Wait a bit," Mole continued. He seemed in a carping humour. Was he jealous of the success of Rosetta? Or did he think it prudent to check her pride somewhat, with an eye, perhaps, to diminishing my too apparent admiration of her? "You've had it all your own way hitherto, and the town all to yourself. A summer's success at the Haymarket may not count for much when the winter comes on. Wait till Covent Garden opens. There may be a different story to tell then. You'll have to play against Mrs. Mountjoy, an old-established favourite and a clever woman, who's secured all the best parts."

"Mrs. Mountjoy, indeed! I've never seen her, but I'm not a bit afraid of her. Let her keep all the best parts. I'll beat her though I only play the worst. I dare say she is clever; she ought

to be, at her age, if she ever is to be. They tell me she's fifty, if she's a day, with black teeth and a long nose like a cucumber. Come, they can't say that of my nose, can they, Duke?" She faced the picture again. "Sir George hasn't flattered that, has he? If anything, he hasn't done my nose justice, I think. He's turned it up too much, perhaps. Does standing up at the top of those stairs make one's nose look as though it were turned up? But he hasn't finished it, I dare say. I came to-day to give him another sitting. But I made a mistake, it seems. I'm always making mistakes, somehow. Sir George is away, and didn't expect me until to-morrow. Never mind; no harm's done. I've met you, Duke; and you'll come and see me act, won't you, and judge for yourself? You won't mind what our friend here says. These old actors like to clip the wings and cut the combs of us young ones. It does us so much good, they think. Not that I bear him any grudge for it; nor does he me, in truth. Only it's his way—it's the way with them all, and they can't help it. I'm not so much to be envied when all's told. I've had but a hard time of it altogether. You know something of that, don't you, Duke? And now that a gleam of sunshine falls

upon me, mayn't I enjoy it, and make the most of it while I can, and while it lasts? It won't be for so very long, likely enough. But you won't stand between me and the light, so as to leave me in the shade and cold, will you, Duke? I'm sure you won't. And when you see I want a hand you'll give me one; and you'll join in the applause when I step on the stage. Nothing braces one up and cheers one's heart like a good reception. It's far better than a glass of champagne. And this old croaker here will do the same, though he pretends he won't. But he will, I'm sure of it, if only for old acquaintance sake. He calls himself Mole now, it seems; but he's been known by other names. That's our way, you know. And he's left the profession, he tells me; but his heart's in it still, I can see that. It's so with us all. Once look on the footlights from the stage and they're always flaming before your eyes for ever after. You can't get quit of them again, though you try never so. Why, when I was dancing at that fair where you first met me, Duke, this Mole was clown to the rope, and called himself——"

"Never mind what I called myself," Mole interrupted.

"Well, I won't mind. And to tell you the

truth, I don't quite remember. It was Signor Something, however."

"That's all done with now," said Mole. "There's no need to recall it."

"Well, I am not ashamed of it; and you've no occasion to be. You were a very good clown, as clowns go." Mole did not seem to be much conciliated by this tribute to his merits. "You were new to the business; anybody could see that. But you did well enough. You could do better in your own line, of course. That was only to be expected. Still you pleased the house. What more could you want? Do you remember a Miss Delafosse, who was at Jecker's in those days?"

"I remember her," said Mole. "A little white-faced slip of a girl, with yellow hair."

"Yes. There wasn't much of her, but there was thought to be promise about her. You thought so. And you gave her hints, you know, about stage business, and how to manage her voice, and how to come on and get off, and that kind of thing, for she was little better than a novice. Well, I listened, and laid to heart what you said. I found it true and useful afterwards. Nobody minded me. I was only Diavolo's pupil, bound to the rope for life as all thought. But I didn't intend that, even

then. I knew I could do better—that there was cleverness in me if I could only turn it to account. By-and-by the chance came to me, and I didn't forget what I'd heard you say to Delafosse. I don't forget now. So you see, if I'm something of an actress now, and people say I am, you've helped to make me one. And I'm grateful, Mole, don't say I'm not. I'm grateful to all who helped me to rise. It wasn't done so mighty easily. No one knows that better than I do. But I won't speak of it now, it's too long a story. And I must be going. I've to meet old Mrs. Bembridge, and we've a lot of shopping to do. Only never think I'm ashamed of the rope and old friends and old times. I don't care who knows that I was once Mademoiselle Rosetta of the 'Cirque Imperial of St. Petersburg. Wasn't that what they called me? It was all nonsense, of course. I was never at St. Petersburg. I don't know where it is. But it was none of my doing. Diavolo called his pupils just what he chose. Diavolo! He was a wretch if ever man was. I shiver at his name, and hate him still, though he's been dead and gone this many a day. Folks may sneer at me if they will. But they can't dance on the rope as I did, and they can't play Rosalind as I do. They can't draw a full house in

the dog days as I've done. You must come and see me act, Duke; mind you do; and we must meet again and again. Where will a letter find you? Here? You must give me your address. Ask for me at the stage-door. I am so pleased to see you again, my dear boy, you can't think! I musn't kiss you now. You're such a man—but I did kiss you once, or was it twice? You remember? And I must speak of it while I think of it. My brain's in such a whirl with talking and laughing, though I've been near to crying, too, twenty times, that if I once forget to say it I shall never remember it again. But I was rude that night, wasn't I? I behaved badly—I'm always behaving badly—to your mother, I mean. She was your mother? Yes, of course, I remember; and she thought worse of me than I really deserved; and she scorned me, and hated me because she believed I'd come to the farm to steal her boy's heart away from her. It wasn't so, really; though perhaps it did look something like it. And I—I was cold, and worn, and weary, and more sick at heart than you'll ever know. I rebelled against her hard looks and stiff words. I paid back scorn for scorn. I was very insolent. The fool that I was! For she was a kind woman at heart—your own mother, Duke!

And she was right. She could but step between her boy and his foolish love. And do you know, as we rode bumping along in that cart over the snow—what a night! and what a journey!—she clasped her arms round me, she wrapped her own cloak about me to keep me warm. I could have cried like a child upon her bosom, if I'd dared. Great Heaven! If I'd had such a mother as that! There, I do declare, I'm really crying at last. What was I saying? Oh, this—I'm sorry, very sorry, that I was so rude, that I behaved so ill. I'd go on my knees to tell her so if she were here. She's forgotten me quite, very likely, but some day I should like her to know, and I want you now to know, Duke, how sorry I am. My temper's a good one generally, but it was in a bad way that night. You forgive me? Well then she will too. The kind soul will do all you ask her, I'm sure. And now I must really go. God bless you, my Duke. You promise to come and see me act? and soon? Come to my benefit. You shall have the best seat in the house. You'll take a box? How proud we are! Nonsense. You'll go in with my order or not at all. Only mind you applaud the Cuckoo Song, and, my dear, if the house does not ring with cheers when I trip on as Little Pickle in the farce,



in a scarlet jacket and white trousers, with a boy's frill round my neck, if the pit doesn't rise at me, then my name isn't what it is. It's Rosetta to you always, by-the-bye. But to the world it's the great, the famous, the fascinating Miss Darlington! God bless you! How poor old Mother Bembridge will scold me for keeping her waiting. Good-bye, Mole. Tell Sir George I'll come to-morrow, or any time he may send for me."

With a bright glance, a winning smile, a wave of her hand, and a crisp rustling of her silken skirts, Rosetta departed.

We remained silent for a minute or so. The stillness of the room seemed strange. It had been reverberating with the animated music of Rosetta's voice, with the bright tones of her saucy laughter. These had ceased and the studio had grown curiously dull and sombre, as though clouds were hiding the sun, and the daylight had diminished.

Mole drew from his fob a clumsy old pinchbeck watch. It had stopped years since, as I believe; but he always carried it, and seemed fond of producing it at intervals, as though it were a sort of symbol and evidence of his respectability. Of old he would have described it as a "property" watch. He advanced towards me, and, assuming the air of a

medical practitioner, he took my wrist between his left thumb and forefinger, and affected to feel and note my pulse.

"Hum! It temperately keeps time, and makes healthful music. How fares your heart, my young friend? You love her still?"

"No, not as you mean."

"You're sure?"

"Quite sure."

"There is no danger, you think, in your seeing her again—in meeting her, often, it may be?"

"There is no danger. I will do anything I can to serve her. I cannot but admire her greatly; for indeed, she is admirable. Is she not? Her beauty seems to me almost matchless. Her vivacity is quite irresistible. The melody of her voice stirs my heart strangely. Her laugh is the most exquisite of mirthful music. Her wonderful volubility and impulsiveness of manner completely carry me away. But—that is all."

"And enough too, I think. Take care, Master Duke, take care."

"I repeat there is no danger. I can admire without coveting. Henceforward Rosetta and I are friends simply. You heard what she said? Besides——"



"You love some one else, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"I can see you do. Your cheeks haven't quite lost their old trick of telling tales. Rosetta found that out. Well, I'll ask no questions. Better that you should love some one—any one else. No. I won't say any one. That would be too hard upon Miss Darlington, as she calls herself."

"Her real name being——?"

"How should I know? To me she was only Diavolo's pupil—Rosetta. Rosetta Nothing. Had she a surname? People haven't always, you know, especially when they happen to be apprenticed to the rope. But what does her real name matter? 'What's in a name,' after all? Won't Darlington do as well as another? The public seem to like the name well enough."

"But her husband's name?"

"The stage doesn't care much about husbands' names. If she marries——"

"Is she not already married, then?"

"You know as much about that as I do; perhaps more. I've heard that she was married. I've heard, too, that she wasn't. Which am I to believe? I don't know; and I don't care. Is it

any business of mine? or yours? I have heard the gentleman's name mentioned——”

“The nobleman's name.”

“Well, the nobleman's name, if you like to have it so. Lord Overbury, to be quite plain. He was a friend of yours at one time. But for him you would hardly have known Rosetta. Is he her husband? As his friend you should know. I declare I don't. She didn't mention him, I observed. That might be like a wife, or it might not. I'd rather not express an opinion on the subject. If you really want to know—though it seems to me yielding to an idle curiosity—why not apply to Rosetta herself? She'd tell you, I suppose. Only it might be thought that you were inquiring whether she was free to marry another—yourself, for instance. And that, after what you've stated and hinted, would hardly do, would it? Or you might address yourself to Lord Overbury. I presume he'd supply you with the necessary information. Have you seen him lately, by-the-bye?”

I told him of the fight in Chingley Bottom, and of Lord Overbury's presence at that strange scene. Mole was much interested; not so much in regard to his lordship's proceedings, however, but as to the incidents of the combat.

"I should like to have seen the Baker punishing the fellow you call Gipsy Joe. I don't fight myself. I don't know how, and I don't think I should much care to, if I did. But I've no objection to other people fighting. In fact, I rather like it. In such a case I could play the part of looker-on very satisfactorily to all concerned. From your description it must have been a lively and exciting affair."

I told him that it was rather horrid, too.

"Perhaps so. But then a fight is such a real thing. That's what I like about it."

I'd forgotten, at the moment, how much of his life had been passed among sham things; in such wise reality had, no doubt, become precious to him simply on its own account.

## CHAPTER II.

ROSALIND.

THEN we talked of Rosetta again.

“Yes, I have seen her act,” said Mole, in reply to my inquiries. “But please don’t ask me to be enthusiastic about that, or, indeed, about anything else. I’m forty” (he might as well have said fifty, I thought), “and at forty, somehow, enthusiasm is apt to fail us. You see one is so lavish with it at twenty, there’s little of it left for use in after years. You will find that out for yourself some day. And then I happen to know something about acting; and *that* makes a difference. But she gives the public what they like—good looks and high spirits. And she knows her words. I don’t pretend to say she understands them. She’s at home on the stage, and she works hard. What more would you have?”

“You saw her play Rosalind?”

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"I saw her attempt the part of Rosalind."

"But she succeeded?"

"Didn't you hear her say so? But there are so many different sorts of success. At any rate there's the success that means nothing, and there's the success that means everything. But I'm not a fair judge of Rosalinds, perhaps. I've seen Jordan in the part. *There* was a Rosalind if you like! I knew Jordan. I played with her one summer in the West of England."

"You were Orlando to her Rosalind?"

"I should have been, but for an infamous conspiracy. Orlando was my part in those days; but it was taken from me and given to one of the very worst actors I ever saw. He was a little better than an amateur. Of course he failed ignominiously, though he had taken pains to pack the house with his friends. I was cast for Charles the Wrestler. It was really too bad. The audience quickly perceived as much, and rewarded me with extraordinary applause. They're fond of wrestling in the West of England. But that wasn't the reason. They saw they had an actor before them. As a matter of fact I knew little about wrestling; although I'll take upon myself to say that Charles was never made so much of as upon that occasion.



No, Darlington cannot play Rosalind. But she goes on in the part, and the public—they're sometimes, not always, in the mood to like anything—like her acting, or what she calls acting. And just now, for lack of something better to applaud, are making rather a pet of her. It won't last, of course. Pets are never long-lived. And they're hardly used sometimes before they're done with. Not that she isn't clever. I don't say that. She *is* clever. It's wonderful to me, considering the few opportunities she's had and the short time she's been on the stage, that she should have contrived to pick up so much. You heard her say that she had learnt something from me? That may be worth remembering if she should ever become really famous. I should think she *had* learnt something from me, indeed. There's a good many more of the profession in the same boat, if the truth were told. Few, I'll venture to state, have ever been in my company that haven't learned something, nay, a good deal from me. And then she had the luck to fall into the hands of old Bembridge."

"Who's old Bembridge?"

"Old Mrs. Bembridge, widow of Harry Bembridge, who played 'utility' at Drury Lane under Kemble, and died of drink. A thorough actress:

the best old woman on the stage, if the public only knew it; but they don't. She ought to have made her fortune long since. But it isn't those who ought to make fortunes that do make them, somehow. Bembridge knows every trick and turn of her profession better than any one I ever met with. She has it all at her fingers' ends. For stage business she's without a rival. Even *I* allow that of her. Why she was treading the boards when I was in my cradle. She was playing Juliet before I could walk. Now she plays the Nurse. She's gone through the whole round of parts. She first went on as Hermione's child. Now she's too old to play Hermione. Fifty years ago she was admired as Lydia Languish. Now she gets applause as Mrs. Malaprop. A wonderfully clever, sound true old body, and an actress from top to toe. Well, she met Darlington, it seems, somewhere in the provinces, and took a great fancy to her; for some odd, woman's reason: she was so like some long-departed daughter born to Bembridge years since. Or the child, she fancied, if it had lived—I won't swear that it ever existed at all—and grown up, would have been just what Darlington is now. So Bembridge declared. Absurd, of course. But you know what women are. No, you

don't though. You can't. How should you? Who does? Anyhow, some strange maternal yearning and tenderness towards Darlington stirred in the old woman's heart, and she took the girl under her wing and made her what she is. Not a great actress. I can't allow that. There are no great actresses now. There never have been but very few. But she taught Darlington all she knows. Her success, such as it is, and it's easily over-valued, is entirely due to old Bembridge. And Darlington's grateful; for a woman, wonderfully grateful. They're always together; they live under the same roof, and, I do really believe, are fond of each other. You see they can afford to be fond of each other. There's such a difference between their ages. Otherwise they'd be rivals, jealous of each other, suspicious of each other, struggling for parts. All that's out of the question as things are. They're like mother and daughter, or grandam and grandchild. A woman can hardly be jealous of her grandmother, can she? And it's an enormous advantage to Darlington that there's a worthy old woman like Bembridge beside her, looking after her, or seeming to look after her. It gives an air of respectability to the business. Darlington's young, you see, and pretty and lively;

and the world has a way of talking disagreeably about young and pretty and lively actresses. For that matter it doesn't spare those that are not young, nor pretty, nor lively. But with old Bembridge always at hand much can't be said."

"You're censorious, Mole."

"Not I; but the world is. I'm not the world. And I'm not hinting anything to Darlington's discredit; mind that. In truth I don't believe there's a word to be said against her. But the idle, scandalous, mischievous talk that goes on! Especially when our profession—I should say the player's profession—is under discussion. And don't think I'm hard on Darlington's merits or demerits as an actress. Only I'm entitled to an opinion on that subject. I've been on the stage myself, as you know—though unluckily you've never seen me at my best, or anything like my best—few people have, perhaps. But see Darlington and judge for yourself. When? Soon, of course. She begged you to go. You can't refuse her. I knew you couldn't. Isn't she Sir George's Comic Muse? I'll get an order and we'll go together, if you like."

So I went with Mole to the pit of the Haymarket Theatre—such things as pit orders were in

existence in those days—and I saw Rosetta play Rosalind.

I may not linger over or descant at length upon that representation. It was received with extraordinary demonstrations of favour by a very crowded audience. Mole was quite noisy in his acclamations. He was constantly urging me to clap my hands anew. Not only in homage to the exertions of Rosetta, but by way of gratifying all the other performers engaged in the play. "Give old Battersby a hand," he whispered to me. (Battersby was rather an effete tragedian, pompous of gesture, and strained of attitude, much inclined to mouth his speeches.) "He can't play Jacques, but he thinks he can. He hasn't really an idea of the part, and he's not more sober than usual. Did you ever hear anything worse than his delivery of the Seven Ages? It was a favourite recitation of my own once. But he's been out of an engagement so long; give the old man a hand!" In the same way I was bidden to applaud Radstock the Banished Duke, Bamford the Touchstone, and Carberry the Orlando of the evening. The Rosalind we greeted with most boisterous cheering.

But although Mole expressed his approval thus publicly, he did not the less indulge in much private

and whispered fault-finding. It seemed, indeed, that he really rated Rosetta's abilities very cheaply indeed. He pointed out that she now and then strayed from the text of the dramatist. He detected false notes in her Cuckoo Song, although they were not audible to me. "That's Jordan's business," he said of some portion of her performance. "She's learnt it all from Bembridge." Something else she did had been done before by precedent Rosalinds, Miss Booth, or Miss Tree, or Miss Kelly—I forget whom now. I thought him very hard to please. He seemed to condemn her alike for venturing to depart from conventional ways of playing her part, and for following the example of earlier actresses. He wearied me with his persistent criticism. I, at any rate, had not come to the theatre for that. I took upon myself to upbraid him for the inconsistency of his conduct. Why did he applaud and censure in the same breath?

"Because I'm an actor," he said. "We always applaud each other. It looks well—has a good effect with the public. At the same time, you know, as an actor I can't help seeing when things are not quite what they should be. And so I've spoken my mind on the subject. But only to you,

my dear Duke. I addressed myself to your private ear. I wouldn't for any consideration reveal my opinions to the general public. Here's Darlington again. Let's give her a hand!"

For my part I was not a critic nor an actor, and I thought Rosetta's performance perfect, or almost perfect. She surprised and delighted me exceedingly. Her appearance was most winsome. She wore her Ganymede dress with infinite grace. I had never seen her look more beautiful. The incline of the stage gave her increase of stature, and she trod the boards with a firm elastic step, moved to and fro with a suppleness of action and freedom of limb that were referable perhaps to long practice of her old profession. Yet was there no repellant over-confidence in her presence upon the scene. She was arch, vivacious, mirthful, yet most modestly feminine withal. In much that she did there was an elegance, a refinement even, for which I was by no means prepared. It was far more than a mere matter of "good looks and high spirits," as Mole had suggested. She was an accomplished actress; and if in her impersonation of Rosalind the more subtly poetic side of the character might be now and then but slightly manifested, no suspicion of deficient intelligence marred the per-

formance. And especially it possessed the poetry of youth, and grace, and beauty. Mole alleged that she did not comprehend the speeches she uttered. I thought the charge unjust. It was clear to me that she entertained a vigorous, broad, and thoroughly dramatic view of the character. "All Bembridge's doings," said Mole. It might be so. Yet something of her own the actress had surely brought to the fulfilment of her task. She was not the trained parrot, the mindless machine, he would have me believe. The audience applauded her to the echo. I fully shared their enthusiasm. It was much to hear the poet's text spoken by that exquisite voice, with its rich volume of melody, and now and then its plaintive throbs and pathetic sub-currents of sound. How witching was her laugh! How touching was her tenderness! And then, was Rosalind ever better looked than by Rosetta? It was in this part, I maintained, that Sir George should have portrayed her—not as the fanciful and rather absurd Thalia of his picture. But when I saw her assume other characters, it seemed to me that he might do well to portray her in each of these, and form, indeed, a sort of Rosetta gallery of paintings.



"Well, I admit that she possesses a certain sort of talent—for farce," said Mole.

This was when she had appeared in the after-piece, as a romp, wearing a short white muslin dress, with a blue sash, and wielding a skipping-rope. I cannot call to mind the name of the play.

"You're prejudiced against her, Mole."

"And you're prejudiced for her. Isn't that so? We're both prejudiced. Will it do you any good to know that another has been as foolish as yourself? My boy, who knows but what we're both moved by the same sentiment, only it has affected us in different ways? Shall I make a confession? I will. I don't pretend to be really wiser, or better, or stronger than my neighbours. I loved Rosetta! 'Forty thousand brothers could not with all their quantity of love'—but I'll not quote Shakespeare. It's a bad sign. Folks will think I'm intoxicated, which is far from being the case."

I must state, however, that he had refreshed himself very liberally (with bottled stout) during the pauses in the performance, contending that playgoing was a dry employment, and needed as much moistening as play acting.

"Men differ," he contended. "Some make an idol of the object of their affections, grovel

before it, and glory in the passion that degrades them. Others love and are ashamed of their folly, revenging themselves by abusing the creature they adore. Perhaps that's my case. Why did I warn you from Jecker's tent? Why did I join Diavolo in his pursuit of his apprentice? Why did I interest myself concerning the fortunes of Rosetta? I loved her. One's never too old to do foolish things. And it was foolish—very foolish. But I was always susceptible and human—very human. It's all over now, of course. It was but a dream, and it's gone, and 'being gone, I'm a man again.' I'm wrong to speak of it. Forget it, my dear Duke. Never mention it again. 'And whatsoever else shall hap to-night, let it be tenable in your silence still.' God bless you! We part here. No, not a step further. I can walk without assistance. Good-night."

How much or how little truth there was in this strange and sudden revelation of Mole's I cannot say. But that there was some inebriety about it I am nearly sure. He never referred to the subject of his love again, however. Nor did I.

## CHAPTER III.

### I CHANGE MY LODGINGS.

THAT I was now an idler in London could scarcely be charged against me as a fault. My profession had, as it were, slipped from under me.

There was some pleasure at first in finding myself released from attendance at the office in Golden-square. I was free from morning to night. My task of copying legal documents under the supervision of old Vickery, my futile attempts to rival the exquisite handwriting of Rachel Monck, had become things of the past. My new liberty was most enjoyable—for a while. I rose at a later hour; lingered over my breakfast; became a diligent student of the morning paper. My toilet now occupied more time than of yore. I lounged about Bond-street and looked into shop windows very persistently. I had some difficulty, indeed, in getting through the day.

Still I was well aware that this was by no means a satisfactory state of things. I was not a young gentleman of fortune. I had no real right to be idle. And the lack of occupation was irksome to me, insomuch that I was sometimes even wishing myself back again in Golden-square. It had been dull and tedious enough there most certainly ; but did I not now and then see Rachel ? Moreover I entertained at that time a foolish young fellow's notion that I had a mission of some sort to fulfil ; that I had to share in the world's progress and a part of some importance to play in life ; a name to make and fame to win. Certainly I was not going the right way to accomplish this.

I received from the Down Farm letters expressing deep regret at the death of Mr. Monck ; no enquiries were made, however, as to my plans for the future. My mother seemed hardly to be aware that the loss of my master had necessarily an important effect upon the position of his apprentice.

Tony's health had, according to his own account, much improved. He spoke of his gaining strength slowly but surely. He made little mention, however, of rejoining me in London, very immediately. Indeed I was inclined to mistrust his report of him-

self. His handwriting appeared to me to be weak and tremulous. It was clear that he had been much shocked by the death of his uncle. I gathered that he had received tidings of Rachel of recent date. But he provided no clue as to her present address. The house in Golden-square, I had ascertained by frequent visits, still remained closed and untenanted.

I determined to seek counsel and aid of Sir George. I had some difficulty in obtaining an interview with him, for, at this time, he was often absent from Harley-street for days together.

He looked paler than ever, and his manner was nervous and fatigued. I thought him really very ill; he explained, however, that he had been travelling all the previous night, and was a sufferer from want of sleep. He received me most kindly. His hand, as he grasped mine, I noted, was burning hot.

I ventured to remind him of his promise to find employment in his studio for Tony, and then explaining the unavoidable absence of my friend, and the position in which I was placed by the death of Mr. Monck, besought him, that I might, for the present, at any rate, fill the post that had been assigned to Tony. I spoke humbly of my ability

to serve him, while I promised to spare no pains to content and to be of use to him.

He smiled languidly, as he said: "Oh, certainly, I shall be glad if I can help you. Something shall be found for you to do if you really wish it, and for your young friend too, if need be. I am pleased that you are now asking for yourself rather than another, and that I am able to give you what you ask, such as it is. But never underrate your own merits, Duke. That's hardly the way to get on. The world is often very content to accept our own estimate of ourselves. It saves trouble; and the world doesn't like trouble. You're quite clever enough to do all that you'll be wanted to do, here. I've not forgotten the drawings you showed me. I told you my opinion of them at the time. I've not changed it. Come and set to work as soon as you please." After a pause, he resumed—"I'm to understand, then, that you have finally abandoned the law, and that art is to be altogether your profession in the future?"

I said I hoped that might be so—but that, at present, I was in some doubt. Under the circumstances in which I had suddenly found myself, I had only ventured to think of a temporary and provisional arrangement.

"You mean, perhaps, that you must consult your friends at home—at Purrington, isn't the place called? Your quitting the law will, I suppose, be some disappointment to them, especially as they have no doubt been at considerable expense hitherto on your account in trying to make a lawyer of you."

"They are most kind and indulgent," I said. "I don't think they will complain if I am content."

"You ought to consider yourself a very fortunate young man;" and he smiled, rather cynically, I thought. "However, if they don't object, of course I cannot. I would not seem to cross or oppose their plans in any way. But, as I understand it, I am not chargeable with harbouring a runaway apprentice, or anything of that kind. And of course you have, after all, a right to please yourself as to your future career. But we'll let it be as you say—a provisional arrangement. You are at any rate welcome to stay here while you look about you and make up your mind. Stay as long as you like, for that matter; I'm quite willing. And the question of remuneration—will you leave that to me? No, don't be too modest again. You must, of course, be paid for what you do. The

labourer is worthy of his hire. Don't fear that we shall not make you useful, and obtain money's worth from you. Are you in want of money now? Pray don't be ceremonious. Nay, I know what young fellows are—how apt to outrun the allowance from home, to think it very tardy in falling due, to wish there were five quarters in the year. We don't, who have to pay rent and taxes. Better take this in earnest of future payment."

He took from his pocket a crumpled roll of bank-notes, and with a laugh thrust one into my hand. It was for fifty pounds.

"Nay, never refuse money. I may not always have it to offer you. You'll soon earn that amount and become a creditor for more. I don't doubt that you'll succeed, Duke. You shall if I can help you. Still you must bear in mind that art is really a serious business. You must look forward to being more than a mere journeyman painter; that's all you'll be here. I think you've taste and talent for the calling. I've not scrupled to say so. But young men are often disposed to believe they like art out of mere love of idleness. They think ours an easy, independent, unrestricted profession that releases them from ordinary rules and ties. They vote themselves geniuses and so disdain industry



and application. They wait for inspiration, and meantime do nothing but lose the power of working and producing. That won't do, Duke, at all. But I didn't intend to inflict this lecture upon you, and the advice is not really my own. Sir Joshua used to say much the same thing, I believe, to the young men who went to him with their drawings, and who were held by their friends to be lads of surprising genius. Hard work, Duke, is the only real secret of success. I've worked hard in my time, Heaven knows, though now my strength fails me somewhat, and I can't do what I did. I grow old, Duke, that's the simple truth."

He was silent for some minutes after this. He leaned back in his chair and slowly passed his hand across his eyes. He seemed lost in thought. Certainly he looked older, much older, than when I had seen him last. And I now discerned lines as of suffering upon his face that I had not before noted.

Presently he roused himself, rising with a weary air from his arm-chair.

"You told me, I think, that you were living in lodgings. I forget where, but I know I have a note of the address, though it would puzzle me to find it just at this moment. Now it occurs to

me that you need hardly be put to that expense. This is a great rambling house. Room in it could easily be found for you, if you cared to take up your abode in it. Something tolerably comfortable could be rigged up for you, I don't doubt, without much trouble. Please, don't thank me. I'm only giving you what I don't want; what is, indeed, no sort of use to me. There are rooms in this house which I have never even entered. And don't fear that you won't be sufficiently independent—that your liberty will be interfered with in any way. You will be perfectly free. There are a good many rats and mice about up-stairs, I believe, but you won't mind that. We'll keep an extra cat expressly on your account, if that will be any recommendation to you. And I shall not be in your way. Very likely we shall not meet for days or weeks together. I warn you that it's nothing very attractive I'm offering you. I confess that mine is a most ill-managed household. We want organization here terribly. If you can put matters on a better footing in that respect you'll be doing me a real service. But a bachelor, occupied as I am—and I was never what's called a man of business—what could be expected of me? Say you'll come and make the best of it, and call

this your home ; I mean for a time only, of course, until your plans for the future are quite settled. At any rate give the thing a trial. I'll not seek to detain you against your will. You consent?"

Of course I consented. I was most grateful to him for his consideration of my interests.

"I'll speak to Mole about it, and Propert shall attend to you and see that you have all you want ; and the housekeeper shall be told to take care of you. But Mole is really the most important person in the house. He is got to be, Heaven knows how, a sort of general manager and major domo here ; and you, it seems, already stand high in his favour. I know little enough about the fellow, except that he makes himself very useful. Indeed, I could hardly do without him now. Mere chance threw him in my way. He amused me rather ; he's a strange comical sort of fellow, as you've no doubt found out for yourself. And I intended to do him a kindness ; but I needn't speak of that, for Mole's quite as useful to me as I am to him. He's really clever in his way. Anything I've done for him he has repaid over and over again. And he's honest ; at least I think so ; as honest as most people at any rate. Otherwise he'd be better off than he is perhaps. It's clear he hasn't been very careful of his

own interests hitherto. There's a sort of honesty in disregard of self. So you understand, Duke; you're to come and make this your dwelling-place as soon as you please.

In a few days I had quitted Featherstone-buildings and become the occupant of an upper room in Sir George's house. It was a spacious apartment on the third floor, fairly furnished, the windows looking towards the street. The adjoining chambers were empty.

"I hope you'll like it," said Mole, who had supervised the arrangements; "I've tried to make it comfortable for you. We'll hang up a picture or two, and that will warm up the walls a little and hide the paper, which is certainly hideous. Sir George didn't choose the pattern, you may be sure. It was here when he first took the house. I've borrowed furniture for you from the other rooms; altogether things look pretty tidy, I think. If there's anything else you want you must tell me of it. I've Sir George's instructions to do all that's necessary, and to make you as comfortable as possible. But they're dreary quarters when all's said and done. I don't think I could live here myself. There's a sort of Haunted Chamber feeling about the place I should never get over. Not that I mean

to set you against the room. But to my thinking there might have been a murder committed here; and that great cupboard in the corner looks to me just the kind of place a ghost would choose to hide in. But that's an absurd fancy, of course. This is a large dreary house enough; but it's of a common-place London pattern. I don't suppose Sir George ever came up these stairs. The painting rooms are underneath you; otherwise you've got this upper part of the house all to yourself. There's no doubt but you'll be quiet enough. And if you don't like this room, you can easily shift to another. You've a choice before you, up here. You're not likely to be disturbed much, except perhaps by the mice in the wainscot and the cats outside on the roof. They make noise enough, at times, no doubt. I hope you'll sleep well. My own impression is that I couldn't manage a wink here though I tried ever so. However, I suppose you can easily give it up if you find it don't answer."

Mole's own abode was something of a mystery. He was generally to be found in Harley-street throughout the day, and sometimes, I think, passed the night there upon a rug in the painting room. Otherwise his habits were rather of an Arab kind, and he pitched his tent, temporarily, just as conve-

nience dictated. So far as I could discover, he had no regular lodging. But tidings of him could often be obtained at a coffee-shop in Red Lion-street, Holborn. And I know that letters were now and then addressed to him—to be left in the bar till called for—at a tavern in the neighbourhood of Drury Lane Theatre. It was an establishment of dramatic character and predilections. Numerous lithographed portraits of actors—all attitudinising in their favourite characters—adorned the bar. The house indeed seemed to enjoy much patronage from the theatrical profession. Mole frequently occupied a seat in the parlour, smoking his pipe and emptying many glasses there, the while he discoursed upon histrionic art. He was accounted, I believe, rather an authority on the subject, especially by those who brought to bear upon it more esteem than information. Here we met many members of the calling, who resembled him in that the art they professed had brought them little more prosperity than it had secured for him; and with these he held much converse. Upon minor subjects they might dissent from his opinions, which were somewhat dictatorially pronounced; but they never failed to agree with him when he declared that the drama—they preferred to call it, “*draymer*”—was in a

hopeless state of decline. So much, to their thinking, seemed proved to conviction by their own lack of success. Their discourse generally, indeed, was of a saturnine character. On certain occasions I had opportunities of hearing it, having been introduced by Mole to the assembly. They harped much upon the bad business this theatre was doing and upon the impending close of that; upon half salaries here and "no treasury" there; upon the falling off of the veteran actor-manager Millstone, and upon the loss of favour recently incurred by the once popular Miss Kneebone. They were severe too, upon the degenerate taste of modern playgoers; they were mindful of past palmy days, when, as it happened, they were themselves prominently before the public; and they wondered gravely how long things could go on as they were going, having already decided that they must end disastrously.

"You have never been over this house before, have you?" Mole inquired. "This is Sir George's room. He's gone out now, and won't be back until late, so there's no danger in showing it you."

He led the way into a confined apartment on the ground floor. It was carpetless and very bare of furniture. In one corner stood a narrow iron camp bedstead, without curtains. Above it, affixed

to the wall, was an antique crucifix of ebony and ivory, exquisitely carved.

"Something of the anchorite's cell about it, isn't there? or, say a soldier's tent? Sir George affects Spartan habits. That's his humour. Every man to his taste. Probert sleeps in much greater comfort, let me tell you. Those windows are left open winter and summer. Wind, or rain, or snow, it's all the same to Sir George. So, at least, he professes. If he had but a touch of my asthma he'd think differently. As it is, he suffers more from rheumatism, or neuralgia, or something of that sort, than he cares to mention."

"He suffers much?"

"He doesn't complain; but I'm sure of it, all the same. And you can read it in his face."

"He is really ill?"

"Don't you find him changed? He is restless and feverish, and though he doesn't lose his temper—he's too fine a gentleman for that—he grows more and more impatient and hard to please. Haven't you seen how his hand trembles of late? He can't sleep. Look here."

He showed me a vial that stood on the mantelpiece. It contained a dark ruby-coloured liquid.

"Is it wine?" I enquired.



He removed the glass stopper from the vial. It emitted a curious medicated odour.

“Tincture of opium,” said Mole, in explanation, “commonly called laudanum. That is how Sir George obtains rest and relief from pain.”

I was alarmed and distressed. Something I had heard or read of the habit of opium eating and its pernicious results.

“You look frightened. But you know a man must have sleep somehow. No doubt Sir George acts under medical advice. A good dose is about twenty-five drops, I believe. I’ve known him take more than that. And the habit grows upon him—or say, rather his state renders laudanum more and more necessary to him. Dangerous? I can’t say. I’m not well informed—I’m without personal experience on the subject. And, to speak plainly, when I want to get fuddled myself, I find simpler drinks serve my turn, well enough. Say, beer or gin. No laudanum for me, thank you. Come away. Enough of ‘prison house’ secrets for to-day. I told you before that your relative is a strange man. And his house is a strange house. Things happen or may happen in it, that are no concern of ours. We’ve but to do our work, and take our wages. Don’t think that too ignoble a view of

your position. But we're both Sir George's assistants now. We'll go to work at another Royal portrait—one's sure to be wanted before long. And we shall have a good deal to do to the picture of the Comic Muse, soon. Come on. It will be like old times at the Down Farm, when I gave you drawing-lessons, in chalk, on a barn-door. You remember? I only wish that Mistress Kem was here—I don't forget, you see—to draw some strong beer for us. How good, and sound, and bright that beer was, to be sure. Is she married yet? There was the making of an uncommonly worthy sort of wife about Kem. For one to whom age was no object, so long as a comfortable wife was secured, Kem would be the very woman."

We were soon busy with yet another replica of His Majesty's portrait.

## CHAPTER IV.

### OWEN'S TERRACE.

At last, from a letter of Tony's, I gathered news of Rachel Monck. She was living for the while, it appeared, in Owen's Terrace, Clerkenwell, with old Vickery and his sister. "My poor uncle, as you are no doubt aware, left his affairs in a very confused state," wrote Tony. "I fear his creditors will be much dissatisfied. It was judged as well to get Rachel out of their way at any rate. The poor child has gone through worry and distress more than enough. She will have peace and quiet at the Vickerys'. I believe him to be thoroughly trustworthy and faithful; he has been always most devoted to Rachel. The house is really Miss Vickery's, who lets lodgings—a sharp, shrewd old maid, but kind-hearted, I think, and most respectable. Rachel has known her for years. Altogether her going there seemed to be the best plan that could be devised.

I thought you knew of all this. If you are ever up Clerkenwell way it would be a charity to call and see Rachel. Owen's Terrace is very near to Sadler's Wells. I should really like to know how she is. What are you going to do, yourself? I fear you have not been very justly treated in the matter of your articles. But think kindly of poor Rachel. I'll not add more now. Somehow writing wears me more than it used to."

There was no need for his enjoining me to think kindly of Rachel. Forthwith I hastened to Owen's Terrace, a row of very small old-fashioned houses, with red-brick faces, burnished door-knockers, and broad white window-sashes; so diminutive and dapper looking altogether that they seemed to have issued from a toy-shop. The New River flowed in front of them, not, as now-a-days, bricked over and hid, like a sewer, but open to the sky, fresh and clear as a country stream. Hopeful anglers sat upon its banks casting their lines into its waters. There were then green lanes and meadows, dairy farms and market gardens, within a short distance of Owen's Terrace. The inhabitants boasted of the pure fresh air they breathed. They were on high ground, they alleged; on a level, indeed, to be particular, with the top of the ball

and cross of St. Paul's. They regarded pitifully those condemned to dwell in less lofty regions.

A bright brass plate inscribed "Vickery" denoted the house I sought, and the lady who opened the door I knew at once could be no other than Miss Vickery. She had the hard aquiline features, and the sharp cat-like questioning eyes of her brother. She was short and spare, and her grey hair was festooned after the fashion of window curtains upon her lined forehead. There was a certain stiff spruceness about her attire. She wore a shrilly-rustling black silk dress, a towering starched cap, profusely ribboned, mittens upon her hands, and a gold watch swinging at her girdle, which was so tightly fastened that I judged her to be decidedly proud of the slimness of her waist. Her manner was somewhat tart.

"If it's the lodgings," she said at once, "it's no use. Captain Brocklebank has given notice; but he's not going. He's changed his mind. He'll change it once too often one of these days."

Captain Brocklebank, I subsequently learnt, tenanted Miss Vickery's first floor, and was an elderly gentleman retired from the mercantile marine service. His temper was uncertain, and he

was much given to fault finding. He had dwelt in Owen's Terrace many years, but had always expressed a fixed resolution to quit it immediately. With this view he invariably kept his luggage packed up and ready for departure. Still he did not depart. It was a frequent complaint of Miss Vickery's that there was an enduring unpleasantness, and that form of disagreement, commonly known as "words," between Captain Brocklebank and herself. But this bitterness of their relations was perhaps mutually beneficial, and had a tonic effect upon their constitutions. The captain continued to be the lady's lodger, and each was in such wise supplied with the stimulus of a grievance.

I explained my mission: I desired to see Miss Monck; and I tendered my card.

"I beg your pardon; I thought it was the lodgings. I've often threatened to let them over his head, and he'll find the thing done some day. He and his notices indeed! I'm sick of it. You're Mr. Nightingale? I know the name." She eyed me suspiciously, looking wonderfully like her brother the while. "Step in, please. You'd better see Mr. Vickery, I think. He's in at present, as it happens, doing a bit of gardening. I'll fetch him if you'll wait a minute."

Presently Vickery appeared, wearing a straw hat. He was evidently surprised to see me, but he bowed politely, in an old-fashioned way, and ushered me into a tiny back parlour.

"I was not prepared for the honour of this visit, Mr. Nightingale. Miss Rachel is well, I thank you—as well perhaps as we could venture to hope," he said, in reply to my enquiries. "Ah, you have heard from Mr. Wray? Precisely. But there was no real intention to keep you in the dark, Mr. Nightingale, as to our movements. You found the house in Golden-square closed and empty? Yes, you would. It will remain closed for the present, probably. Miss Rachel does us the honour to remain with us for a little. We thought the change might be beneficial. It was my sister's suggestion, and I quite agreed with her. Ours is but a humble abode, as you see; but any change seemed advantageous under all the circumstances of the case. And Miss Rachel, you are aware, had but few friends whom she could consult. Not but what I'm sure I may consider you as a friend of the family, Mr. Nightingale. That has always been Miss Rachel's opinion."

I assured him of my earnest desire to be of

such service as I possibly could to Miss Monck, lamenting my limited power to aid her.

"It has been, it still is, an anxious time for her, of course. She feels her bereavement very deeply, I need not say. But her health improves, I think. Want of rest was really killing her, Mr. Nightingale. She was a most devoted daughter. It is a comfort to her now, no doubt, to think of that. But I need not pursue the subject. You have called at the instance of Mr. Wray, I think you said? I apprehend, however, that I am not to regard you as representing Mr. Wray, in relation to any claim he may have upon the estate of the late Mr. Monck? No, that could hardly be, of course."

He watched me closely as he said this. I understood the object of his inquiry. I could not doubt that poor Tony's small fortune was involved in the ruin of his guardian and trustee, Mr. Monck.

"I possess little information on the subject," I said. "But I am very sure that my friend Mr. Wray will urge no claims of the kind you mention, to the embarrassment of his cousin, Miss Monck."

I fancied that his face brightened and that he breathed more freely.



"It's a sad business," he said, with a change in his manner. "I feel that I may speak to you confidentially, Mr. Nightingale. Mr. Monck's affairs are not in a satisfactory state. I think I told you that he left no will, and that I could not advise Miss Rachel to administer. It is most important that she should be spared further trouble and anxiety of whatever kind. There are many debts and liabilities. How many I am not yet prepared to say. On the other hand, there are large sums—for costs in Chancery and on other accounts—due to the estate. I am most anxious to save something, if I can, out of the wreck for Miss Rachel. As a small creditor—for some arrears of salary merely—I think of administering to the estate myself. But this is in strict confidence between us, Mr. Nightingale. I shall do nothing hastily. I must proceed very cautiously. Trouble, of course, I shall not spare, nor hard work. For that, of course, I am prepared. I may fail, but, at least, I shall make the effort, solely and simply, you will please understand that, Mr. Nightingale—solely and simply in the hope of benefiting Miss Rachel. I have not spoken to her on the subject, and I do not intend to do so at present. Still I find it a comfort, although I own that it should not be so to a

man of my practical habits, to make mention of the matter to some one—to you, Mr. Nightingale.”

He paused for a moment, for his voice was quavering, and his eyes were filling with tears. He refreshed himself with a pinch of snuff, and presently resumed.

“I don’t want to have my motives misunderstood, that’s all. Somehow, I’ve come to regard Miss Rachel’s interests as a sort of sacred trust in my hands. I’ve no legal warrant for it, of course. It’s an old man’s crotchet, perhaps—a foolish crotchet, some may say. But I think it does us good to have such crotchets, Mr. Nightingale. I know I feel the better, the stronger, even the younger for it. I’d give my life, if need were, to serve Miss Rachel. So I’m going to fight this battle for her; for it will be a battle. I shall have trouble in bringing the creditors to terms. I shall compel them to accept a very small composition. But it will be that or nothing. I shall not administer until I see my way quite clearly in that respect. One of them, you think, might step in to administer in my stead? No, they dare not. They’re afraid of the expense; they know the liabilities are very considerable. Besides, you see, I have the advantage of them; I’ve practical ex-

perience of things of this kind, and no one knows so much of Mr. Monck's affairs as I do. I'm prepared to fight every inch of the ground. And I've everything to win and nothing to lose. I'm a poor man, as you know, Mr. Nightingale, when all's said. Not that they'll find me yielding or easier to deal with on that account. And—and I shall die happy if I can save something out of the wreck for Miss Rachel."

I was touched by the old man's chivalric devotion to the interests of his employer's daughter. I felt that I had hitherto done him much injustice. I was remorseful on the subject of certain caricatures I had at odd times perpetrated of him. He was but a lawyer's clerk advanced in years, of eccentric aspect and quaint ways; strangely dressed, and taking snuff copiously out of a tin box. Yet, nevertheless, he was capable of heroism. His fidelity was supreme—he was fully possessed with the spirit of self-sacrifice. I began to be almost jealous of his love for Rachel. Surely, it could not transcend my own? He seemed to read my thoughts.

"It is not only the young who can love, Mr. Nightingale. How it came about I can't tell you; but I've got to look upon Miss Rachel as my own

child—if it isn't a liberty to say so. I love her as a father might—more, if possible. A father looks for a return of his affection, for respect, and dutiful obedience, help and sympathy, in his old age. I ask for nothing but the privilege of loving and serving her."

I found myself wringing old Vickery's hand with a cordial regard for him I had not five minutes before believed possible.

"But for yourself, Vickery," I said.

"Don't fear on my account, Mr. Nightingale. I shall not starve—there is no danger on that score. I'm well known in the profession. I've already had some very advantageous offers. Messrs. Foskett, Bishop, and Erle, a most respectable firm in Lincoln's Inn Fields, will want a managing clerk after next term; I've no doubt that I can obtain the situation."

He seemed thankful to find himself once more upon unsentimental ground, as it were. He was a little regretful, I think, that he had been betrayed into confessions that he had by no means contemplated. With many other men, if not ashamed of being moved by generous feelings, he was at any rate anxious that the fact should not be generally known. He enlarged upon his practical knowledge

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of the law, upon his intimate acquaintance with the offices in Chancery Lane, and presently had returned to the subject of his plans, as the administrator of the late Mr. Monck's estate.

"And you see the matter is of some importance to you, Mr. Nightingale. You may be spared a reference to the court. As Mr. Monck's administrator I shall be in a position to transfer your articles of clerkship to some other solicitor, who may be selected by you, or by your friends, with that object."

I begged him not to trouble himself on that head, and announced that I had decided to abandon my legal studies.

"Dear me, have you, indeed? It seems a pity, too. Your handwriting was rapidly improving; and, really, if I may say so, you might have become a credit to the profession. And though you may not think so—for your experience of it has been a little unfortunate, I'll allow—it's a lucrative profession, Mr. Nightingale. Looked at in the right way it's attractive, interesting, exciting, and profitable. Well, well, you are the best judge, of course, of your own inclinations. And what might you propose to do, may I ask, Mr. Nightingale? Write for the stage? I wouldn't on any account

say a word against the play you were so kind as to read to us—The Daughter of the Doge, it was called, wasn't it?—indeed I thought much of it very admirable; but, as a profession, do you think writing for the stage would be satisfactory to you, would be quite the thing, Mr. Nightingale?"

This allusion to my unfortunate tragedy seemed to me uncalled for, to say the least of it. I viewed that work as dead and buried; it had never been much more than still-born. To me, its parent, it was yet a tender subject, however. I could not, unmoved, bear much reference to it.

I explained simply, perhaps rather stiffly, that I was now living with my kinsman, Sir George Nightingale, serjeant-painter to the King, and was employed as an assistant in his studio.

"Sir George Nightingale!" Vickery repeated.

"Yes. The gentleman upon whom I once served a writ, you may remember."

"Precisely. I know Sir George in a way. He was not always so famous as he is now. I happen to know something of his early history. But perhaps you don't care to hear anything on the subject. He's your kinsman, as you say, and it is not for me to disparage him in any way."

## CHAPTER V.

### YOUNG GEORGE.

I CERTAINLY did not wish to hear Sir George disparaged: and yet I was curious to know what special information Vickery possessed concerning him.

"No doubt," I said, "he rose from a position of some obscurity. That is usually the case with great painters. They achieve eminence by their own exertions; not merely because they have been at the trouble of being born." This borrowing from Beaumarchais was lost upon Vickery.

He hesitated. He was willing that Sir George should be lowered in my esteem. Had I not deserted the law for him, and was it not a fair reprisal therefore to decry him? But yet the old man's dislike to needless disclosure was very strong; reticence had become a confirmed habit with him. He was probably blaming himself already in that

he had been so exceptionally outspoken on the subject of Rachel Monck, and his plans for her welfare.

“It’s little enough I have to tell, Mr. Nightingale,” he said at length. “I shouldn’t have used the word disparage. I don’t really mean that. I only referred to Sir George’s early days, when he was, of course, unknown, comparatively speaking. He was little more than a lad when I first saw him. It was at Bath. I was a young man myself then, and I had some relations settled there, whom I visited when I could. His father—old Mr. Nightingale”—it was very strange to hear of an *old* Mr. Nightingale—“was settled in Bath as an artist, but only in a humble way. He gave lessons and took likenesses. He lodged in the Vineyards—you know Bath, perhaps? Well, that was where he lodged. I remember there were specimens of his drawings displayed in the window. They were to be seen also at the print-shop in Milsom-street, with a statement of the terms upon which he gave instruction—so much a lesson. I forget how much—but it was thought to be very moderate. Still old Mr. Nightingale did not thrive—could not find much employment. He was understood to be very poor. But I dare say I’m only telling you what,



as one of the family, you already know very well."

"Indeed not." And I explained that I was unaware even of Sir George's existence, until some time after my arrival in London. I reminded Vickery again of my service of the writ. That was surely conclusive that I knew nothing of Sir George. At home I had never heard his name mentioned. I judged these Bath Nightingales to be only distantly related to my family.

"No, you didn't know him when you served the writ upon him, Mr. Nightingale, I remember. Although, if you had known him, it could have made no difference. We only followed the instructions of our clients in proceeding against him. It was simply a matter of business. And if I knew that he was your relative—I don't say that I did not know, mind—it was not a subject for me to be talking about. It was no affair of mine. I was only Mr. Monck's clerk."

He paused for a few moments. He was watching me closely, as though to discover in my face some expression of distrust of him. As he proceeded, his manner grew more hesitating. He seemed to find a difficulty in selecting and arrang-

ing his words. But he did not cease to observe me narrowly.

“Young George Nightingale, he was very young then, was a handsome boy—at least, that was the general opinion—with fine eyes, regular features, and long dark hair hanging down to his shoulders. He was so smart and clever, and precocious, that he was thought to be quite a youthful prodigy. The ladies admired him very much. He was a sort of general pet and favourite. Drawings of his were exhibited, portraits even, which he had accomplished when he was quite a child—only ten years old or so. It was predicted, even then, that he would live to be a great and famous man. His father had trained and taught him, and it *was* said, though it was, of course, denied, that old Mr. Nightingale helped a good deal in his son’s drawings—touched them up and improved them. I’m no judge of such things myself, so I won’t offer an opinion. But, if the father helped the son, it is certain that the son helped the father, and brought him into notice. The old man’s been dead and gone, I need hardly tell you, this many a long day. But people of fashion flocked to his painting-room. All the Bath gentry took notice of young George. Folks were quite proud to think that the clever

boy had been born in their city. They patronised him, and had their portraits taken by him. Mere sketchy things—crayon drawings, I think they call them. And they paid well for them, too. Of course, this was to the old man's advantage; but it was enough to turn the boy's head—he was made so much of, and pampered and flattered, and patronised by the great."

"Well, and what followed?"

"I was not in Bath long after that. But so much I know of my own knowledge. Not that I pretend for a moment that I was on equal terms with old Mr. Nightingale and his clever son. I knew them by sight, but not to speak to them. I come of very humble folks myself—I'm not ashamed of it. I had an uncle in Bath in those days, a tradesman in a small way of business; and my sister was apprenticed there to the millinery business. She gave it up afterwards, when she came in for a little bit of money, and settled here in London. But I had news of Bath long after I left it. Its gossip and talk reached me in various ways. And I heard a good deal of handsome George Nightingale and his goings on, the fine company he kept, and the extravagance he permitted himself; he had learnt it of his grand friends, no doubt. But then they

were rich, and could afford to be extravagant. He had only his calling to depend upon. He had to work for his living; they hadn't. That made a great difference, you see. Still, he was bent upon being a gentleman; his good looks were not to be denied; and for dress he was what's called the pink of fashion, for all he was only the son of a poor drawing-master. There is excuse to be made for him, no doubt. He was very young, and he'd been so spoilt by flattery. He's a handsome man, now—at least, that is the general opinion, I believe; but, at the time I'm speaking of, he was certainly very attractive-looking; I don't know that I ever saw a handsomer young fellow. Well, he got into debt and other troubles; and then something occurred which made him quite the talk of Bath. There was great scandal about it. Hush!"

Vickery's story was interrupted. Rachel Monck had entered the room.

She looked very sad and wan in her black, crape-trimmed dress. Yet her eyes were bright, and, as she moved towards me, proffering her small, soft hand, something of a kindly smile quivered like a dancing ray of pale sunshine about the delicate lines of her lips.

"You are very good to come," she said, simply.

"I have often thought of you and your great kindness to me and to those I love. I only just heard that you were here. I was busy, upstairs, writing."

I noticed that she wore upon her wrist, as of old, the black cover to protect the sleeve of her dress.

"It is Miss Rachel's pleasure to do copying work still," said Vickery, with an air of apology. "I have begged her to rest for a while; but she is wilful, and she must be obeyed."

"I must do something," she said. "I cannot be idle. And I am so used to writing: I like it, if only because it prevents me from thinking too much. I have so many sad thoughts. Besides it is my only gift. I am not clever as other girls are. I can play but a very little, and during my dear one's long illness I had no heart to touch the piano. I cannot draw, and have never learnt fancy work. I am more used to the pen than the needle. Besides I have to earn money—a duty to fulfil I may not be a burthen to my friends. So Vickery obtains work for me from the law stationer's, brings home the papers for me to copy, and is most careful to spare me trouble. I could not write just at first; my hand trembled so, and the tears would come into my eyes. But I get on

better now ; my writing is firm and strong again, and I mean to work hard to make up for lost time."

"Not too hard, and not at night, Miss Rachel. You promised me that," said Vickery.

"It shall be as you wish, old friend," and she gave him her hand. He retained it for a moment in his, while he contemplated her with a tender affection, which invested his quaint harsh features with an air almost of nobility. Then he smiled, nodded cheerily to her, and quitted the room.

"You have heard from my cousin, Mr. Nightingale ? "

"Yes, I learnt your address from him."

"It was very good of you to come," she repeated, scarcely knowing what she said, I think.

"He writes to you often ? "

"Not very often, and but briefly." She seemed almost gratified at this.

"I have not heard from him very lately. He is unwell, I fear, and no doubt writing is irksome to him ; it always was. He spoke of coming to London, soon ? "

"Not in his last letter."

"It is better that he should stay where he is,"

she said, with a sigh. "He is well cared for there, and happy, he tells me. I longed for him to be here, when—when my great affliction came upon me." Her voice failed her, and tears filled her eyes; but, with a quick movement of her hand, she brushed them away. "I seemed so lonely, so completely desolate. It would have been such a comfort to have had him beside me, to have felt his hand in mine. But all happened for the best. Strength came to me. I was braver than I thought. God is very merciful—and I bore my burthen; how, I scarcely know; at least, I did not sink under it, as at one time I feared I should; as, indeed, I almost hoped I should. It was as well poor Tony was away. He's not strong, and he has a most tender heart. The anguish of that terrible time—I wince and shiver as I think of it, even now—would have tried him cruelly. He wrote me the kindest, sweetest, tenderest letter—poor dear good boy! You don't know how it eased my aching heart, how I cried over the letter, until it was wet with my tears. I read it over and over again—I know it all by heart, every word—my kind Tony!" She waited for a few moments, covering her face with her hands. "It may seem strange," she resumed, presently, "that I should

speak like this to you, Mr. Nightingale, almost a stranger to us. But no—you're not that—you're his friend and mine. A kinder, truer friend, could not be, and you will bear with and pity and forgive my tears and my weakness. If you only knew how he speaks of you—and of your mother! He fills his letters with telling me of her exceeding kindness to him. I long, of course, to have news of himself. But to know that he is loved and happy is very much to me. And your mother seems to regard him almost as though he were her own son. I sometimes think that he is for the while filling your place. Poor boy! No wonder he is touched by her goodness to him. He has never known before what a mother's affection is like. I wish I could find words to tell how grateful I feel to her. I long to join him in thanking her for all her kindness. Is she like you, Mr. Nightingale? I have never seen her face—perhaps may never see it—though I trust that may not be so; yet I seem to have known her for long years. You will come again?"

Of course I would come again.

"And you will bring me news of him, if you receive any? I am most anxious about him, and," she added, rather sadly, "it is natural, perhaps,



that he should write more freely to you than to me. Is he better, stronger than he was, do you think?"

"He spoke of improved health when last he wrote."

"You are not hiding anything from me? Don't do that. I can endure. I have been taught to be patient under suffering. Perhaps that inclines me always to expect bad news. I cannot be hopeful. But you will see me again when you have again heard from him? I may rely upon that? Poor Tony: he is so careless of himself always. But your mother (Heaven reward her!) will care for him in spite of himself. I've comfort in thinking that. Good-bye, Mr. Nightingale. Thank you again and again for all your great kindness to him and to me. I shall never forget it. I'm sorry now I did not see you before; I did not mean to hide away from you. My coming here was very suddenly determined on. But in my trouble and despair, I could not trust myself to see any one. My heart was too full; my grief too great. Even kind words wounded me more than I could bear, and kind eyes were full of pain to me. But do not doubt my gratitude. I shall count you always among the truest and best of my friends, though, indeed, my friends are but very, very few."

So I left her, more than ever loving her, more than ever impressed and held by her pallid wistful beauty, by the purity and goodness of her nature, by her suffering and self-sacrifice.

With my love for Rachel there mingled a respect and reverence that purified and subtilised it. She was to me more than a woman; she was as a saint also. And if I might not love her with the hope of winning her love in return, at least I might pay her homage and adore her unceasingly.

Meantime she knew nothing of—did not even suspect—my love. Her heart was given absolutely to her cousin—my friend. I was oppressed with fear lest she should discover my secret. For what would follow? She might do me injustice, suspecting that I demanded payment of any poor services I had rendered her. My motives might be misconstrued; I might earn her distrust, even her scorn.

No; it was better, far better, that she should not know. Only it was hard, very hard, to keep constant watch over myself and hide the truth from her. My heart so longed to find relief in words; I feared it would betray me in spite of myself.

## CHAPTER VI.

### AN INVITATION.

I MISSED Tony greatly. He would have taken so much interest in my new labours—would have so cheered me with his sympathy. Perhaps I missed, too, the applause he was wont to lavish upon me. It was too flattering, it was undeserved, no doubt; still it gladdened and encouraged me. I had not the heart to find fault with it. It would have been like finding fault with him.

Mole was what is called “good company.” But I could not esteem him quite as I did Tony. I felt much the lack of a comrade of my own age and standing, whose views of life and the world were in accord with mine, even in their foolish hopefulness and young temerity. Romance and sentiment had still charms for me. I could scarcely speak upon such matters to Mole. Time and experience had made him too practical and prosaic. He had out-

lived ambition, probably. He was not troubled by anxieties as to the future; it held out to him no particular promise, and he did not care to contemplate it. There was something of the stroller still, perhaps, in his method of thought and existence, only that he no longer looked forward to possible triumphs to be achieved by-and-by. The cares of the day were sufficient for him. He had secured an engagement; that was enough. When it terminated it would be time enough to seek another. He was content meanwhile. He asked but for enough to eat and to drink—the latter especially. He was never despondent, except, perhaps, as to the condition of the modern stage, and that failure of his voice which had closed his career as an actor. But he knew how to impart a certain humorous flavour even to these subjects. I always found him entertaining and enlivening, kindly and considerate. He took great pains to instruct and improve me in the art of painting. Every day I worked with him in the upper studio, the “manufactory,” as he called it. His skill was unquestionable. I often marvelled that he had not turned it to more profitable account. Surely he might, had he so chosen, have been something better than Sir George’s journeyman. Had he been hindered by some inherent

defect in his moral constitution, "some vicious mole of nature?" (I did not mean to pun upon his name.) It could not have been merely lack of opportunity. Or had he erred at starting by mischoice of his profession? But I was on dangerous ground. If I was now a painter, or trying to become one, had I not previously essayed farming and law?

It was a curious life I was leading. If I sometimes deemed it monotonous and confined, even somewhat dull, I consoled myself with reflecting that I was really acquiring a profession, serving an apprenticeship. In any case, I was Sir George's assistant but for a term, which I could conclude at any time. And my occupation had its pleasures. Even the replica of the Royal portrait I was engaged upon, though Mole viewed the task irreverently, was to me full of interest. I congratulated myself upon the decision and correctness of my outline—upon the force and breadth of my execution. It was the largest canvas I had ever worked upon. I delighted in plying my brush with a drumming sound, as I spread and rubbed in colour over the tightly strained elastic surface. Every now and then I retreated some yards from my easel, to consider the effect of my performance, and I noted with gladness how gradually the kingly figure was emerging from

hazy inanity, and, with every stroke of my pencil, assuming more and more of the hues and aspect of life.

“ I really begin to feel myself a painter.”

“ Of signs, or of scenes ? Which ? ” Mole asked laughingly.

“ But only look at the noble folds and shadows of these velvet robes.”

“ Wait until you’ve been at work as I have upon a dozen or more of those portraits. You’ll begin to find a very Republican feeling stealing over you.”

Sir George, I was gratified to learn, had expressed his satisfaction with my labours.


I saw but little of him. He had been true to his promise that I should not be interfered with in any way, that I should enjoy perfect liberty in his house. My room had not proved the Haunted Chamber Mole had described it to be. My rest there was undisturbed by ghosts. I slept soundly, and, so far as I am aware, no apparition ever issued from the great corner cupboard. All was still enough ; save for now and then the rumbling of coach wheels in the roadway, and, sometimes, very late at night, or in the early twilight of morning, the noise of the street door closing. Sir George had re-entered. He was usually absent

after sunset; the hour of his return home was always uncertain.

He only worked intermittently at this time, often declining to see his sitters on the score of his health. Still he was never altogether idle. Sometimes he would mount to our studio, inspect our progress, and touch upon the canvases before us, always, as it seemed to me, to their advantage, although Mole generally disputed this. I thought his eye wonderfully correct. He detected errors and shortcomings very promptly. His manner was invariably polite. "I think you'll find that's rather out of drawing, Duke," he would say; or, "I fancy you might improve that heavy mass of shadow by breaking it up a little." He did not so much give orders as offer suggestions. "Oblige me with your brush for a moment;" and with an adroit stroke or two he effected a real improvement. I was more than ever convinced that he was in truth a great portrait painter. In his composed way he seemed pleased, or perhaps I should rather say, amused with my evident admiration. "You only want practice, Duke. You'll do all this for yourself, some day, far better than I can do it." And as he spoke he patted me encouragingly on the shoulder.

He occupied himself, too, with sketching and planning works to be completed at some distant day—when he had time. He was haunted, I think, by a desire to win distinction in the future as an historical painter. He was employed at intervals upon a series of allegorical compositions to be executed on an imposing scale. But he was apparently hard to please. He was moved by impulses; then came weariness and dejection, and his hastily adopted projects were thrust aside and abandoned, as though the temperature of his enthusiasm had lowered, or some insurmountable difficulties had suddenly confronted him. There seemed about him a want of power to concentrate his energies. He was now languid almost to lethargy; a drowsiness oppressed him that would not be shaken off. And now he was strangely stirred, his eyes curiously bright, and every nerve tremulous with excitement. At times too, I am satisfied, he suffered acutely. The lines in his face deepened, and he looked very wan and worn. He would stop abruptly in speaking, with a painful wincing expression. But he uttered no complaint. He seemed anxious, indeed, to hide his suffering.

One day Propert brought me a message from him. He desired to see me in his studio.





"I'm sorry to trouble you, Duke, but I'm sketching, and I want a line or two from nature. It's a fanciful subject. Perhaps you would not mind sitting to me for a few minutes. Clasp your hands—so. Yes, that will do. Lean forward a little. Look up. Your head turned a little to the left. Yes, that is just what I wanted. Lean forward a trifle more. Thank you."

He sat down at his easel and began sketching. Now glancing at me, now bending over the drawing-board before him. I remained perfectly still. After a while the scratching sound of his crayon gradually ceased. I ventured to turn towards him. He was not drawing. His head had sunk upon his breast. His gaze seemed fixed upon the ground at his feet. His hand hung down listlessly before him, still holding the crayon, however. Suddenly it slipped from his fingers. The noise of its fall roused him. He started and shivered. He was deadly pale.

"Are you ill, Sir George?" I enquired, hurrying to him. He was silent for some moments.

"Where am I?" he demanded at length. "You here, Duke? No, it's nothing. I'm not ill. I was led away by my thoughts, I forgot where I

was ; what I was doing. That happens to me sometimes."

His voice sounded weak and hollow. I felt alarmed about him.

"But indeed I fear you are really ill, Sir George. You need rest and change."

"That's easily said," and he laughed, strangely, I thought. He rose and moved towards the mantel-piece ; leaning there, with his hand covering his eyes, he presently grew more composed.

"It was a feeling of faintness, that's all, Duke ; I'm subject to it at times. It comes over me quite suddenly, and sets my hand trembling, as you see. Happily it doesn't last long, however. It's nothing really to be alarmed about. I'm quite myself again now. But don't speak of this to any one. I've not been very well, lately, as you know. A very little seems to upset me now. I shall be better soon. But I'll not trouble you any more now. It's plain I'm not in a working mood to-day. You must sit to me again some other time."

"If you could only rest for a while, Sir George, and breathe pure fresh country air. I'm bold to say it, perhaps ; but if you would but come home with me—to the Down Farm."

"That can hardly be, Duke," he interposed

coldly, I thought, and almost with an air of contempt.

"Forgive me." I felt that I had been presumptuous. I had forgotten how great a man he was.

"I have nothing to forgive. I have reason, indeed, to thank you; for you mean kindly, I am sure. But are you quite certain you have authority to offer me the hospitality of this Down Farm—this home of yours, of which you seem, and rightly enough, no doubt, so fond and proud? Would your friends there—your relations, sanction and confirm your invitation, do you think?"

"Certainly, Sir George. They are your relations, too."

"That's true. But the fact has been so long overlooked—forgotten, almost by me, if not by them."

"No, not forgotten, or I should not be here. And they have not forgotten it, and will not. Besides, they would heartily welcome any one who had been so kind to me as you have been, Sir George. I'll answer for them."

"That's bravely said. I never dare answer for any one. But you're young, and I grow old; that makes a difference, no doubt. For what you call

my kindness, please don't speak of it. It's been but a trifle at the best. I think I've told you so before. Never waste gratitude. The thing is too rare and precious. Rest and change are hardly for me. I have, as you know, many engagements—much to occupy me. I cannot quit town. And, in any case, the change you propose would not benefit me, I think."

"The Farm's but a humble place, I know, in a very retired part of the country; but the air of our downs is wonderfully pure and healthful. My mother and uncle might seem to you, perhaps, very homely, simple people; but they are most kind of heart, Sir George. They would be pleased to be of service to you; they would feel honoured by your presence in their house. You would be assured of perfect rest and quiet. No pains would be spared to forward the recovery of your health."

He had appeared to hesitate; at least he had spoken somewhat faintly. I had thus been emboldened to dwell anew upon the merits of my proposal. But he answered somewhat impatiently, beating his foot upon the floor, while his face flushed somewhat—a patch of colour glowing on either cheek—

"I thank you, but it cannot be, Duke. Your

home is delightful to you, very likely ; it should be so ; though you were nothing loth to quit it. To me it might prove dull and dreary beyond expression. Perfect quiet would drive me mad, I think. I can bear my maladies—the remedy you propose would be unendurable. You’re a young physician ; you must study your patients a little more closely before you venture to prescribe for them. It cannot be, I say. Your Down Farm is not for me. Don’t look hurt, Duke. I did not mean to offend you. My temper is less under command than it used to be—than it should be. My words were ill-chosen. I’m sorry that I spoke so sharply. There was no need for it. Forgive me, Duke, and let me say again, I thank you.”

I had felt somewhat offended, I own ; but I was appeased in a moment. His conciliatory tone and his graceful kindly air were not to be resisted.

“By-the-bye I think I must make a sketch of you, a new sketch, Duke. I shall do nothing more with this I think—at any rate for the present. It must be laid aside with my other failures—they increase and multiply sadly as time passes, and age comes on me. But it’s the same with us all ; and this is but a poor thing. Your head, I have noticed, comes very well in certain lights. And you have,

at times, a certain expression I should like, if I could, to secure. I really think I can do something rather better than ordinary with it. We'll see, however. You can give me a sitting to-morrow morning, let us say? It's a fancy of mine, but I'm sure you'll humour it. I won't keep you any longer now."

I sat to him for an hour or so on the following morning, and on some subsequent occasions. He said little, but he worked assiduously. He seemed not altogether satisfied with the result, however.

"My skill is failing me, I do think," he observed. But after a pause he went on again with the drawing. It was in black and red crayons, an imitation, as Mole declared, of the manner of Bartolozzi.

"He's always imitating some one. Yes, it's something like; but flattered of course. Your nose hasn't such a delicate line as that, and your chin isn't nearly so refined. But the eyes are good. He always succeeds with his eyes. That's the real secret of his fame."

Mole studied the portrait for some time, frequently comparing it with the original.

"He ought to do it in oils; but he never will. A fancy of his he called it, you say? Yes, he's full of fancies. But I don't suppose he'll take it into

his head to paint me—although, if he really wanted a striking subject, he might go further and fare worse. But I forgot—you're a relation of his. That explains it, perhaps. I'm not. I've no relations, in fact. Though, if I were to come into a fortune—which is not likely—I dare say I should find plenty who'd claim kindred of me, although they certainly wouldn't have their claim allowed."

"A letter for you, Duke," said Sir George one day.

"For me?" It was from Rosetta.

"Miss Darlington—she was here this morning—entrusted me with its delivery. It contains an invitation, I believe. You are an old friend of hers, it appears. You saved her life once—so she says; but that, perhaps, is only her theatrical way of talking."

He was smiling, and yet, I thought, he was watching me rather closely.

Rosetta, I knew, was a frequent visitor at the house in Harley-street, although I rarely saw her. Not that the picture of the Comic Muse was nearly completed. But Sir George had been making numerous sketches of the actress. She had sat to him repeatedly. He had portrayed her in fanciful costumes as St. Cecilia, Pandora,

Iphigenia, Sensibility, Calypso, &c. These were but slight works for the most part; mere outlines in some instances. It was not clear that he ever intended to finish them.

“She is very charming; I have rarely seen a more beautiful head. And she is clever, too, in her way. You will visit her of course, as she wishes it. Only remember, Duke, actresses are not quite angels. At least, their wings usually fall from them as they quit the stage. They reserve poetry for the footlights. Don’t throw away your heart—but you won’t. Too many hearts have been placed at Miss Darlington’s disposal already; more than she can possibly know what to do with. She is lively and amusing, and I’m always glad to see her. There’s not a word to be said against her, I believe; except that an actress is—an actress.”

It was a badly written note; badly spelt. The signature “Rosetta” was certainly sprawling, with a smeared flourish beneath it. I was invited to tea on Sunday evening at six o’clock at the lodgings of Miss Darlington and Mrs. Bembridge, in Gerrard-street, Soho.

The postscript ran, “Mind you come, my Duke!”



“You’ll go ? Of course you’ll go. I was sure of it.” And Sir George moved away, smiling, yet rather tartly I thought.

## CHAPTER VII.

### TEA WITH AN ACTRESS.

ROSETTA lodged in the house of a carver and gilder, who dealt also in pictures. The rooms she occupied on the first floor were comfortably furnished, although they wore rather an untidy air. A bonnet and a parasol were deposited upon the cheffonier ; there was a hair-brush upon the mantelpiece, amid a litter of soiled gloves, laces, scraps of paper, ribbons, and other odds and ends. The chairs were much occupied by parcels, bandboxes, and articles of dress. A handsome shawl, hurriedly discarded, apparently, rested half upon the sofa, and half streaming down upon the floor. There were slippers within the fender, and a pair of clogs under the table. Allowing for the feminine character of the majority of these objects, the apartment had about it, I thought, rather the disorderd and neglected look of a young bachelor's abode.

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The fumes of an early dinner of a succulent and highly-seasoned kind—roast pork, I decided—were very present in the house.

I was heartily greeted by Rosetta. “My Duke! How pleased I am to see you!”

She wore a closely-fitting dark merino dress, which displayed her rounded symmetrical figure to advantage. Her hair was somewhat disarranged, thrust from her face in tangled masses; but its variegated richness of colour, its light auburn about her temples and brow, and the many threads of gold that were intertwined in its cables of deep brown, were perhaps best exhibited in that way. I was duly introduced to Mrs. Bembridge; a stout old lady in a lace cap trimmed with scarlet ribbons—which relieved the high suffused colour of her face. She was sitting near the open window reading a Sunday newspaper, through tortoiseshell rimmed spectacles. She had rather fierce eyes, with heavy black eyebrows.

“I’m glad to see you. You’re a good young man, I’m told; and what a comfort that is to think of! There’s not too many of ’em about, that I can see. Find a chair if you can. Rosy, my dear, your rubbish is all over the place.”

Mrs. Bembridge gave me her hand; it was

small, soft and white—she was proud of it, I think. There were many rings upon her fingers. Rosetta's hand was shapely, but large, with rather a manly hardness about its palm. There was a decanter of sherry on the table, with wine-glasses and a plateful of filberts. These Rosetta cracked readily with her strong white teeth, throwing the husks out of the window. Mrs. Bembridge preferred to use nut-crackers, I noticed. Time had perhaps unfurnished her mouth, although the dentist had apparently refitted it, handsomely enough. But his handiwork could scarcely be applied to such a violent exercise as nut-cracking.

“My dear, the stuff they put in the papers!” exclaimed Mrs. Bembridge. “You never read such nonsense. There's a fellow here telling me how I ought to play Mrs. Malaprop—as though I wasn't the best judge of that, at my time of life. Why, I'll warrant I played Mrs. Malaprop before this creature was short-coated. If you ever want to find where the people are who teach their grandmothers to suck eggs, I'll tell you where to look for them—in the newspaper offices. I've no patience with the man: setting me right about Mrs. Malaprop—a likely thing indeed!”

I soon gathered that there had been a repre-

sensation of *The Rivals* on the previous night, and that the journal Mrs. Bembridge had been reading contained some adverse comments upon her performance in that comedy.

"What does it matter, mother?" asked Rosetta.  
"Don't be cross."

"It doesn't matter, Rosy. What does anything matter? And I'm not cross, as it happens. Only these things put me out of temper. They'd put you out, too; only you know the writer has loaded you with praise. He can't find words good enough for you. You're perfection, and something more, it seems. What a thing it is to be young, and to have bright eyes! But there'll be faults enough found with you, before you've lived to be my age, never fear, Rosy. Come, ring the bell—I'm dying for a cup of tea. And so is your young friend here, I dare say; Mr. —, I forget the name, though you've told it me often enough. Ah! Nightingale—thank you. There was a Nightingale, some years back, I remember, who used to play juvenile tragedy at York—a gentlemanly young fellow enough—but I don't suppose he was any relation of yours. And, by-the-bye, if he's still living, that Nightingale must be an oldish man by this time. For it's an age ago, now I come to think of it."

"My Duke's relation is the famous Sir George Nightingale," said Rosetta, busy over the tea-cups.

"To be sure, I remember now. I've seen the name often enough in the print-shops; and I've seen Sir George too, though I didn't know who he was for a long time, and wondered what business he had in the Green Room. He didn't come to paint my portrait, it seemed. I call Sir George a handsome man."

"I should think he was a handsome man," said Rosetta. "My dear, his eyes look one through and through; and what a smile he has! I love Sir George."

"Don't talk nonsense, Rosy; and pour out the tea, or you'll have the second cups as weak as weak."

"But I mean it. That is, I mean——"

"You don't know what you mean. You never did."

"I mean that if I were ever to love any one—which isn't likely, perhaps—it would be a man like Sir George, as near as could be. I don't suppose there's quite such another in the world. I'm half afraid of him at times. And somehow I think a little fear is a good thing in love. It keeps love in order, you see; compels one to keep watch over

oneself and to behave one's best. I'm always in terror lest I should offend him, and I wouldn't do that for the world. I feel that at a harsh word or look from him I should shrink abashed into my shoes. If I were to offend him I should never forgive myself. That's odd, isn't it, mother?"

"I don't know about it's being odd. I call it foolish."

"Because you know I don't feel that with any one else. As a rule I don't care what I say or do. But it's different with Sir George. Am I afraid of him because I love him? or do I love him because I'm afraid of him? Which, do you think? Well, I won't say *love*, as you seem to object to the word."

"I think your conversation's absurd and improper."

"I'll say *like*. Come, that can't be absurd or improper; for I like you, you know, mother, and Duke here, too, of course—my dear old Duke. That can't be wrong, surely. And I don't care what I say to you, either of you. But it's different with Sir George, as I said before. Not but what he's very kind to me. He makes allowances for me, without, I think, despising me; at least, without despising me very much. He looks down

upon me, of course, in his grand way ; but yet he is gracious too. He lets me chatter on, and sometimes I almost, but never quite, forget whom I'm talking too. I amuse him, I suppose. It must be new to him to have an odd flighty creature like me chattering about his studio, instead of the superfine lords and ladies he's usually painting. I'm only an actress, paid so much a week to exhibit on the stage. An actress to-day, I was a rope-dancer yesterday. I don't forget that. I know it and he knows it. For I told him of it. If he were to despise me for it, he'd despise me less, perhaps, for telling the truth about it. I amuse him, and I like, I take pains to amuse him. I'm rewarded when he smiles, and I often make him smile. There may be a trifle of contempt about his smile ; but it isn't all contempt. And to my thinking he's handsomer than ever when he smiles. It's strange how with a look he can set my heart beating ever so quickly. I'm talking nonsense now, mother, I own."

"Then leave off, for Heaven's sake."

"No, I'll go on. Now that I'm sure it's nonsense. For, in that case, there can't be any harm in it, can there ? I'm nothing to him ; I know that. I'm only a model it suits him to paint from. Perhaps any girl with hair and eyes and complexion



like mine would do just as well for him. Only I don't quite think so ; I don't like to think so, that's the truth. One doesn't like to think that there's a lot of people about in the world who would do just as well as oneself. Perhaps I'm just a little different to the rest, and he's found that out, and so— No, of course I'm nothing to him. And he's nothing to me, or he should be nothing. Only he isn't. And I'd go to him from the world's end if he wanted me to sit to him, if I could be ever so little useful to him. I've missed rehearsal to go to him, and I've been fined for it. But he doesn't know that. And he says my portrait is the best he ever painted, and that it will make us both famous. Both ! Think of our being put together like that ! But he only said it to please me, likely enough. He's a kind man, only his heart is packed away rather out of reach somehow. I suppose he knows where it is to be found. I don't. Is he well, Duke, your cousin, or uncle, or whatever you call him ? ”

I was unable to give a very good account of Sir George's health.

“ He's ill—that's what you mean. I was sure of it. There's something strange come over him of late. Is he unhappy, do you think ? But he can't

be—so rich and famous as he is. Why has he never married, I wonder? Has he never loved? But you can't know, of course. Women enough have loved him, I'm sure. He's ill—now he's pale, and now there comes a patch of scarlet on his cheek. And at times his hand trembles very much, and the colour flies from his lips; and his eyes—how strangely they glisten! There, mother. I'll say no more. But when I get talking about Sir George, I never know when to finish."

"You'll excuse her, Mr. Nightingale. She's in one of her madcap humours to-day—although it's Sunday, worse luck."

"Sunday; so it is. Well, I don't act and I never look at a part on Sunday. I'm entitled to appear in my own character, therefore, however crazy it may be. And it is rather crazy, all things considered, isn't it, Duke? You found that out for yourself, didn't you, ever so long ago? Do you like thin bread and butter, or thick? I never tasted butter when I was Diavolo's pupil. I was thankful to get lard—and sometimes—my! what a treat a penn'orth of treacle was! Now, here's every luxury: strawberry jam and watercresses and shrimps. You'll have shrimps, mother, I know. There's a cold knuckle of ham in the house, if any

one's particularly hungry. I'm rather in the humour to make a good tea myself. Have another lump of sugar, Duke? Is your tea to your liking, mother?"

"The tea might be better; but it will do. And if you could only sit still and hold your tongue, Rosy, for a little, we should all get on very comfortably together, I dare say."

They both talked, I thought, needlessly loud. I had forgotten that they were in the habit of addressing themselves to large audiences. There was something of the manner of the stage, too, in the liveliness of their gestures. Mrs. Bembridge possessed a deep strong voice, and spoke with much decision, articulating her words very distinctly, moving her black eyebrows up and down the while, and waving to and fro her small white hands. She emptied many cups of tea and a plateful of shrimps. Rosetta ate with hearty appetite several thick slices of bread liberally coated with jam.

"I'm wonderfully fond of jam," she confessed. "The worst of it is, it makes one's fingers so sticky. I'm afraid you'll think me very greedy and vulgar, Duke."

I disclaimed such an opinion. She was per-

fectly simple and natural; could she, therefore, be fairly chargeable with vulgarity? To myself, however, I admitted that she was somewhat unrefined in manner. A little while ago I should not, perhaps, have perceived this. I should have rejected the notion of such a thing being possible; but it was clear to me now. She had not changed; but, somehow, my point of view had shifted. I contemplated her now with different eyes. They had studied other objects.

“Of what are you thinking, Duke? Why do you look so grave? Do my flighty ways seem so very strange to you? I’m what you see me to be. Don’t think me worse than I am.”

She paused for a moment, while her bright, steady gaze searched my face.

“Do you know,” she said, presently, “that every now and then you’ve an odd look of Sir George? I like you for yourself, and I like you still more for that.”

Mrs. Rembridge shrugged her shoulders. She disapproved of this persistent harping upon Sir George. I accounted it a mere idle whim of Rosetta’s—a freak—without much real meaning. Her manner of speaking was always somewhat breathless and headlong. She gave her thoughts

words, on the instant—almost before they were distinctly formed. Her mind was in a state of fermentation; and this subject of Sir George was for ever bubbling to the surface.

“He gave me this chain. Wasn’t it kind of him? I shall always prize it for his sake.” She showed me a rich gold chain coiled many times round her white neck.

“When Rosy gets ‘the talks’ on there’s no stopping her—and there’s no knowing what she’ll say, and what she won’t say. Haven’t we had enough of Sir George for to-night, at any rate?”

Rosetta sighed, stirring her spoon in an empty cup, meditatively.

Presently we were discussing theatrical topics—the triumphs that the future had in store for Rosetta; the past successes and the experiences generally of Mrs. Bembridge. I was an entertained and sympathetic auditor.

We were disturbed by a loud knocking at the street door.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### ROSETTA'S CONFESSIONS.


ROSETTA and Mrs. Bembridge started and looked significantly at each other.

"I cannot see him," said Rosetta, rather faintly, "if it's—you know who!"

"Of course it is. You'd better let me go."

"If you would, mother." Mrs. Bembridge rose, smoothed her skirts and left the room with rather a determined air.

"It does seem strange that you should be here, Duke; you who know so much of my life—though you don't know all. We were but boy and girl when we first met; what a while ago it seems! I'm a woman, now, famous and envied, so people tell me. But I'm not much to be envied when all's said. Knowing what you know, you can think more kindly of me than the others can. Or if you blame



me, you'll not blame me so harshly as they would, perhaps."

She was speaking in a sad, soft, musing tone, as she leant forward, pressing her hands upon her forehead. After a few minutes Mrs. Bembridge re-appeared, with a flush of anger upon her face.

"The old story," she said curtly.

"Is he sober?"

"Need you ask?"

Rosetta sighed, went to her desk, which stood on the cheffonier, took from it a scrap of folded paper—a bank note, I felt sure—which she handed to Mrs. Bembridge.

"It's too bad, Rosy."

"It must be, mother. I can't let him want."

"Why not?"

"You know I can't—only he must keep away from the theatre. He must promise that."

"I've no patience. He'll promise anything."

"Give it him, please, mother. Tell him he must make it last a long time—and send him away."

It was now dusk; the street lamps were lighted and shining into the room. I had been sitting near the window, looking out into the quiet street. It was Sunday, and there was little traffic. A man was standing by the post at the corner, crying "Wal-

nuts" with a fruit basket poised on his head. There was no one else to be seen.

Mrs. Bembridge had again left the room. I was alone with Rosetta. She did not speak, but I could hear her sigh. I could hear, too, voices in the narrow hall down-stairs. Presently the street door closed noisily.

"Come from the window, Duke," said Rosetta, starting up with some excitement of manner. "Yet what does it matter?" she added, almost in the same breath.

A figure crossed the roadway; a shuffling stumbling figure, dingily dressed, so far as I could see in the uncertain light, round-shouldered, and bowed forward, as it moved along. I could not be mistaken.

"Lord Overbury!" I said almost in a whisper.

"My husband!" Rosetta had hidden her face in her hands. She was crying, I think.

"Husband, indeed!" Mrs. Bembridge had hurriedly re-entered. "Come, Rosy, let's have no more of this nervous hysterical nonsense. Rouse yourself. 'Light up!' Let's have candles, and shut the shutters. I hate this sitting in the dark, like so many cats. If you can see, I can't. This 'between the lights,' as people call it, gives me the



blue devils always. I begin to think myself a wicked old woman, and that there's nothing worth living for, and that the sooner I'm 'called,' for good, the better it will be for all parties. The wind blows cold, too. It isn't summer weather, you know. Shut out the night, and the cold, and the dark, and let's be as cheerful as we can. An old body like me may be allowed to be dull and dreary; but for two young folks such as you and our friend here to be giving way to the dismal like this, it's perfectly disgraceful—that's what it is. And on a Sunday, too, of all days in the week!"

Rosetta closed the windows, drew the curtains, and placed lighted candles upon the table. But she did all this as one in a dream might do it, and without uttering a word. Presently she resumed her former place at the table, again leaning forward, resting her head upon her hands.

"My husband," she repeated, softly. "For you know, mother, I always thought him my husband."

"Well, what does it all matter, now?" demanded Mrs. Bembridge. "You were wrong, as it happened; but it wasn't your fault. Who dares say it was? You were wrong, and the man was a wretch. That's all about it. A good many men are wretches, and that's the truth."

"I was a mad, foolish girl."

"That's very likely."

"I had not sense enough to doubt him; and how was I to know that *she* was living?"

"You couldn't, of course you couldn't. My dear, you were shamefully used. There's not another word to be said about it. And now, for Heaven's sake, talk of something else."

"No, mother, I must talk of this."

"Well, then, excuse me if I take the easy chair and the newspaper and sit in the corner. And don't be shocked if I have a nap. I can't bear to hear you going on in this way, Rosy. What good can it do to you or me, or to our young friend here, or, indeed, to any one?"

"No good, mother. That's true, enough."

"If you'd taken my advice, you'd have locked that monster up long ago, and let the law punish him, as the law would, if it's worth anything, of which, I own, I've doubts."

"I couldn't do that, mother. You know I couldn't. He's not really my husband—that seems plain enough."

"Not a doubt of it. You've been told so over and over again by people who should know, and who do know. That other woman was alive—lives

still, I believe. You know what old Vickery said."

"Vickery!" I exclaimed.

"What, do you know him?" asked Mrs. Bembridge. "He's an old friend of mine. He knew all about the case. He, or the lawyer he was with—I don't understand these distinctions—but he's not exactly what you call a lawyer himself—had been mixed up in that wretch's business years ago."

I noticed that they never once mentioned Lord Overbury by name, although there could be no possible doubt that it was to him they referred. But Vickery! It took me by surprise to hear of him in connection with Rosetta's marriage.

"You may take old Vickery's word for it, Rosy," Mrs. Bembridge continued; "and if I've said so once, I'm sure I've said so a hundred times—that your marriage was no marriage."

"He's not really my husband," Rosetta repeated. "I know that well enough. I ought to. Still I thought he was; and that protects him. It's not for me to punish him. Besides——"

"You'll say you love him next."

"No; but he knocked down Diavolo! I can never forget that. You don't know what a leap towards him my heart took when he did that!"

"Rosetta, you're crazy to go on in this way.

At times you're a sensible girl, enough, as girls go ; but to-night you're fairly crazy." Mrs. Bembridge settled herself in her easy chair and retired behind the newspaper. "I'm sorry you let your friend, Mr. Nightingale, see you in this state. I'm ashamed of you. I don't know what's come to you. I can only assure you, Mr. Nightingale, that my lady is not often thus."

"But Duke was there!" cried Rosetta. "He saw him knock down Diavolo, at a blow! a single blow! although Diavolo was as strong as a giant. He could lift enormous weights with his teeth. He could bend bars of iron. He could twist a poker round his neck until it met in front. Yet he went down at a blow! I can hear even now the thump of his fall upon the earth." She spoke with extraordinary excitement; but, after a pause, she continued, in a calmer tone. "Ah, Duke, you saw that, you remember? But who could forget it? You were standing by, a mere boy at the time, yet even you, when Diavolo struck me, tried to rush in and shield me. I saw you, though I mocked you at the time. My dear, you could have done nothing. Diavolo was my master. He often struck me; he had a right to—so they all said. I was his apprentice. I was to be taught, and beaten if need be,

until I did what he told me. What a life it was ! And how long it had been going on ! It seemed to me that it would never end. I remember Diavolo almost as long as I remember anything. And there was no one to come between him and me ; no one dared, he being such a wretch as he was. For father and mother—they were idle, meaningless words to me—I knew nothing of them. I was a stray child. Heaven only can tell why or when or where I came into the world. I came to be Diavolo's apprentice—and for that only, as it seemed. Well, he fed and clothed me after a fashion—and somehow, I learned to read and write—I often wonder now how that happened. But something I picked up from the other children, his apprentices, who had been, so far, a little more fortunate than myself. I learnt my letters, I remember, from the bills outside the tents, and something the riders and the circus people taught me. They were kind to me—there are many good true hearts among them—very kind ; for they saw what a poor forlorn little wretch I was, and how cruelly Diavolo used me. But they did not dare to interfere much, for that only made it the worse for me. I can hear the whistling of his horrible cane even now ; I can almost feel it slashing upon my poor shoulders.

What a miserable life it was! Not that I was always crying and repining; don't think that, Duke. I had a child's glad heart—a child's happy forgetfulness—at times I could laugh and make merry with the rest, when our tyrant's back was turned. Once I remember, while he was at the public-house, we broke up and burnt his cane. But we suffered the more for it afterwards; he bought a thicker one. And I liked the applause, the rows and rows of admiring faces, the sea of clapping hands — when I danced. They threw flowers to me sometimes, and sometimes halfpence. I was welcome to the flowers; but the halfpence Diavolo took to buy drink with—for himself. Still, what a life it was, I say again! I shudder and shiver as I think of it. Are you listening, mother?" she asked, suddenly turning to Mrs. Bembridge.

"No, my dear. If I were to listen, I should cry. Besides, I've heard it all before."

"Well, Duke, then you came with him. You both spoke kindly to me—he was rough in his ways, but still he was kind, he meant to be kind—while you were blushing and trembling like a girl, with admiration and love. Wasn't it so? But we won't speak of that. He offered me escape. Think

what that was to me ! Escape from my miserable life, from blows, and cruelty, and want—from Diavolo ! I could not hesitate. It was not because he was a lord and rich, as they said. That was but a small part of the temptation. It was not for love, heaven knows !—the man was old and hideous. But he was able to save and protect me. I had seen him strike down Diavolo. It was very wicked, no doubt ; but my heart thrilled with joy and gratitude to him when he did that. I felt that he had fairly won me, and might wear me if he chose—that when he said ‘come with me,’ I needs must go—there was no help for it. It was escape, at any rate, let come what might afterwards. So, as you know, I went with him—away from you, from the fair, from Diavolo, from my old life, as I thought, for ever, in a postchaise and four ; it was the first time I had ever travelled so grandly !”

She paused for a few moments, collecting her thoughts, as it seemed, or dwelling upon her memories of the past.

“I was to be his wife ; he promised me that—he swore it—he was always swearing. I was but a child in years—ignorant enough, I need not say ; yet something I had learnt, more than most children perhaps, of the world’s wickedness. I had a knife

with me. I had kept it hidden by me ready sharpened for some time—to use it—I scarce know how—against myself perhaps, or Diavolo, though I never had courage enough for that, often and often as I wished for his death. But I am wearying you with this long story. He kept his word to me; at least he seemed to keep it. We journeyed on and on, without stopping, weary hours and hours, fast as four horses could go. Diavolo gave chase, but not for long, I heard afterwards, and he took the wrong road. If he had overtaken us, he could have done nothing. He would have been knocked down again, perhaps. And I had my knife! We were married in Scotland, just across the border. It was a lawful marriage, people said, though it took scarcely a minute. I was given my marriage lines, and I called myself, like a fool, Lady Overbury, and thought it sounded well.”

“I don’t want to be unjust to him,” she resumed presently. “He was violent, reckless, and for a long while we wandered hither and thither in a purposeless way; we had no settled abode. He was not rich, as it proved; indeed people said he was ruined, though somehow he had money enough to squander. Still he was kind to me when he was himself; but that wasn’t always, for he drank like



Diavolo, and then he didn't know what he said or did. I was treated at first like a spoilt child, or a pet plaything. I amused him, I suppose. Then came his sullen morose fits, and he was unendurable, or his storms of wild anger, and then he was worse. He grew tired of me—but he didn't beat me—so far he was not the tyrant Diavolo had been. And at first, in his good-humoured moods he even took some pains to educate me. I learnt lessons and did exercises. That didn't last long. Still it improved me. He had read many books, you know, Duke," she explained, simply ; " he had been to college and was really learned—though he had not turned his learning to very good account. But he was very different in that way to the people—the riders and circus folks—I had lived amongst. For all his strange looks, and rough doings, he was a nobleman, and had not altogether forgotten how to behave like one. He was bad enough, but he was not all bad. And he would have me be a lady, he said ; he corrected me when my words or my ways seemed to be too much those of the circus. He made me rich presents ; he bought splendid dresses for me to wear. And then I used to act, and learn speeches, and recite them, to please him or to keep him in a good humour. I was a different

creature, after my marriage, to the child you saw in the booth at the fair. My marriage, I say, for I thought I was married. But he tired of me, as I said. And then we quarrelled. I was jealous ; as his wife, I had cause to be. We led a wretched life together. At times I thought him downright mad. I ran away from him, as you know. I was not too patient, [perhaps ; but indeed it was more than I could bear. You found me in the snow. I was going, I hardly know where, now—back to my old life somehow—for I knew that Diavolo was dead. I saw it in the newspaper. Your mother—good, kind, sweet soul!—too kme back to the Hall. It was best, perhaps. He had brought me there—why, I don't know—it was a sudden freak of his. We had moved about in that way, going from place to place, like gipsies, or soldiers on a march. Well, we made up our quarrel for the time. He promised amendment—promised all sorts of things—and we were friends again. It's odd, I think now, the sort of power he possessed over me then. I was afraid of him, and I was grateful to him. Had he so willed, I should have stayed with him for ever—wretch that he was—if only he had given me a kind word now and then. But that wasn't to be. You loved me—didn't you, Duke ? and didn't you—or was it all a

dream?—look in at the window when I was sitting with him beside the fire in the little room at the Hall? that bitter night, after your mother had taken me home?”

“It was not a dream, Rosetta,” I answered, with some feeling of shame at the thought of my old infatuation: and I related some particulars of my adventures on that memorable night.

“You loved me, my Duke! How proud I ought to feel—and I *was* proud of it—I knew it, though I knew too that it was folly, and that it wouldn’t, couldn’t last. Still my heart yearned very tenderly towards you, Duke. And yet, in some strange way, your love did not then seem so much to me as one kind word from him. I can’t explain it. I can’t reason upon it. I dreaded him, at times I loathed him—you know something of what he was—not all; and yet at times I almost loved him too. At least, so it seemed to me, and so, looking back upon it now, with very changed eyes, it still seems to me. You see, Duke, we women are strange creatures. If you haven’t found that out for yourself, you will. We’re very, very strange creatures.”

“Speak for yourself, Rosy, please,” interposed Mrs. Bembridge. “Don’t speak for me, at any

rate. I'll not own that I'm a strange creature, if I die for it."

"Have you been listening, mother?"

"No. But I couldn't help hearing. How can I sleep with all that incessant chatter, chatter, going on? It's nonsensical enough to set one dozing—but it doesn't. When are you going to stop?"

"Very soon now. But you said I had 'the talks' on me. I must make your words good. And my Duke isn't tired."

"I think I caught something about his having once been in love with you. I don't wonder that he soon changed his mind."

"I'm just coming to where I met with the dearest, kindest soul in the world, who took pity on me, and sheltered and helped me in my very sore need. Who saved me, and who's been a mother to me since, the best of mothers, and who is my dear old old friend for ever." She rose quickly and caressed her friend.

"I don't want kisses. But I should like," said Mrs. Bembridge, "a glass of hot brandy and water, strong, with sugar in it—or I'm sure I shall not get a wink of sleep this blessed night."

## CHAPTER IX.

### BAD NEWS.

“MIND, I wasn’t an angel, nor anything like it,” said Rosetta; “and when he was ill-tempered I turned ill-tempered too; only I never swore as he did; I couldn’t do that. We were rich one day and poor the next. He was for ever gambling and betting at horse races and prize fights. Now there was money to throw out of window; now there wasn’t enough to buy bread, or drink—he cared for that more than for bread. Well, I knew all at last. He told me. My marriage was illegal and I was not his wife. There lived some one who had a better, a real claim to that title. He flung the truth at me as you’d fling a stone at a dog. It was too cruel of him; but he was weary of me; he was sick and tired, as he said, of going dragging about the country with me tied to him, hindering and plaguing him. Well, he wasn’t the only one who

was weary. So I quitted him on the instant. He was sorry afterwards, I believe, and followed me, trying to get me back again. But he lost trace of me, and then, as I heard, he went abroad for a while. For me, I wandered on without resting, parting with the few trinkets I had taken with me, one by one, to pay for food and my night's lodging. I was looking for Jecker's booth. I had friends there, I knew, who'd help me back into my old way of life. Then I found mother, bless her, or she found me, and she saved me and made me what I am. Didn't you, mother? The pains she took with me; the kindness she showed me; the love she's borne for me ever since!"

"There, there, Rosy, enough and more than enough's been said about that; another word and I march straight off to bed."

"And I mayn't even sing her praises! I must leave you to guess, Duke—though you'll never guess it all—how good she has been to me, and how grateful I am! I worked hard and tried my best, for I felt that was the only way I had to show her what I felt. How thankful I was to her for all her goodness to me! And I succeeded; I scarce know how. The public liked me; I can't tell why. It was all mother's doing, and no

one was more pleased than she was at my success. She stood in the wings to encourage me when I went on to speak my first lines. They'd gone clean out of my head, and my voice was dead in my throat and I was trembling all over. But I caught courage from her brave kind eyes, and then came the applause, and I don't remember much more or how I got off till I found myself half-fainting in her arms—the good kind soul! I'd succeeded, thanks to her!”

“Rosy!”

“There, I've done, mother. I'm crying, you see, and I can't well talk while I'm crying. That's my story, Duke. I wanted you to hear it, so that you might think as well of me as you can. And it's all truth I've told you. Have I been so much to blame? There are lies enough told about me, I know; but you won't believe all they say. I'm on the stage and I can't help their flinging hard names at me. It's the world's good pleasure to do that, and I must bear it. Only an actress! Don't you see the women's lips curl scornfully, and their eyes dart contempt at me as they say the word? If I were as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, I shouldn't escape their calumny. That's in Hamlet, you know, Duke. I've played Ophelia in the country—

mother, here, was the Queen, though the part's rather out of her line. It was at Norwich, wasn't it mother? Well, my marriage was no marriage. I thought I was his wife and I wasn't. That's the worst they can say of me. Let them say it; I don't care. Ah, Duke! you don't know what an actress's life is. It makes us as bold and fearless as men, and as heartless, almost."

"And you've seen him since, Rosetta?"

"Yes, Duke, he found me out; but mother here was with me, and I was not afraid. I was angry, perhaps, but not revengeful. He was poor and wanted money, *of me!* I never thought he could have stooped so low as that; but he did. He came to me a poor, trembling, downcast, witless creature, asking for money to be lent to him, not given; he had some scheme in his head—such head as was left him—for winning enormously at cards or with dice, I forget which. I was to be paid back out of his winnings. And don't think he was penitent for the wrong he'd done me. He spoke no word of that. He didn't even pretend penitence; perhaps that was as well. He'd forgotten it all very likely; washed it out of his mind with drink. Well, I gave him what he asked for; and he's been since for more and more; and had it. Not that I'm rich.



I work hard for all I get, and I don't get more than I know what to do with. Mother, here, was for handing him over to the law, to be punished, imprisoned, I don't know what; but I couldn't do that. No, I give him what he asks for. That's my revenge, Duke. I pity him. I can't let him want."

"It's not right, Rosy."

"Is anything right, mother?"

"But you can't go on like this. How is it to end? You must make money—for yourself—now, while you're young and strong, and put by against rainy weather, which is sure to come by-and-by, when you're old. My dear, I know, to my cost, what a bad husband is—otherwise I shouldn't be toiling and slaving on the stage at my time of life. Still he was my husband, sure enough. That's more than you can say of the creature you give money to. I was his lawful wife, and, fool that I was, fond of the wretch, although he did rob me of all I had, and leave me and my child to starve. However, he's dead now—I cried my eyes out, I know, when they came and told me of it—and there's no good to be got by talking of him. But it's different in your case. You can't go on wearing your heart out on the stage till all those pretty roses and lilies have faded and gone, and

you're too old to play young women. What's to become of you then? I shall be dead and buried, sure enough. But you'll never be able to play old women as I do, Rosy. You're clever, my dear, but that isn't in you. You must earn money, and save it, and keep it—make hay while the sun shines. And if a good man with a true heart should make you an honest offer——But there, I'll say no more of that. Marriage seems to be a poor woman's only remedy; we all fall back upon that; but it's a miserable business when all's said, and mars more than it mends, it's my belief. However, you'll marry some of these fine days, take my word for it. It's a risk we women must run—for fate drives us to it; not that there's much driving wanted in most cases, I'm bound to say."

"No, mother, I shall never marry—again," said Rosetta, rather sadly. Mrs. Bembridge shrugged her shoulders.

"Well then, there's no more to be said—only this: I'm weary and sleepy, and I'm going to bed—and good night, Mr. Nightingale; and when you come and see us again, as I hope you will soon, for you've a simple, honest, young face, and I like you—I'm an old body, you know, and may say these odd, blunt things—when you come again, I promise

you, we'll be a little more cheerful, and talk about pleasanter topics. I don't know, I'm sure, how we fell into the dismal so. It was Rosy's doings. When she begins her flighty airs she's sure to end in being melancholy. She shan't do so again while you're here. Good night. God bless you ! ”

“ Good night, my Duke.”

But before I left, Rosetta insisted upon writing an order to admit me to see her next performance. She wrote slowly, and with some difficulty, her lips and even her tongue visibly following the movements of her pen. She was pleased, however, with the result of her labours, waving the paper to and fro to dry the ink, and smearing the writing in the process ; for no blotting paper could be found in the room.

Poor Rosetta ! I mused tenderly and compassionately over her story. I had no heart to blame her, if indeed she was at all blameworthy. That she had been cruelly, scandalously wronged, seemed quite unquestionable.

I determined to see Vickery, and gather from him, if I could, the facts connected with Lord Overbury's marriage. I had an excuse for seeing him—I would hand him Rosetta's order. He was a play-goer, and that would tempt him.

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He expressed many thanks for the order, and a smile crept over his face as he folded up the scrap of paper and deposited it in his pocket-book. He was fond of the play, he admitted, but he did not go very often now—not of late years. Somehow the play was not quite what it used to be. He remembered Mrs. Siddons, and many other of the great performers that were before my time. No, I could form no conception of how great they really were—it was not to be expected that I could. Still he had heard Miss Darlington very highly spoken of. He would certainly avail himself of my kindness and the order, and go and see her. He promised himself much pleasure from his visit to the theatre. He was much obliged to me.

But on the subject of Lord Overbury he was not communicative. His face changed as I questioned him; his smile faded away, and he eyed me suspiciously. I mentioned Mrs. Bembridge's name.

"Yes," he said; "I have the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Bembridge. I've known her some years. An excellent actress and a very worthy woman. So I have always understood. Precisely. Yes. I knew her when she was playing here at the Wells a long time ago now. And I'd seen her at Bath before that. For Lord Overbury—

well, Mr. Nightingale, you know enough of the profession to know that we don't care to speak openly of official matters. They're in the nature of secrets, you see. What we learn in that way we regard as strictly confidential. But I'll say this: Mrs. Bembridge has been misinformed, or has misunderstood. The late Mr. Monck never acted on behalf of Lord Overbury. His lordship's name, however, was well known in Mr. Monck's office."

"But if he wasn't a client, there can be no harm in your telling all you know about him."

Vickery coughed behind his hand; his eyes blinked. "You seem anxious on this subject, Mr. Nightingale. Well, I don't mind saying that we acted for the late Lord Wycherley. There was an action at law, of course, Lord Overbury being defendant. It was a very scandalous case. We obtained a verdict. Then there were proceedings in the Ecclesiastical Court, carried on by our proctors. Finally we went to the House of Lords, and obtained an act for the dissolution of the marriage. Lady Wycherley was afterwards married to Lord Overbury. It was understood, I believe, that he would marry her immediately after the passing of the act; he had always promised

that; under all the circumstances it seemed only right."

"And she still lives?"

"I have not heard of her death," said Vickery, taking snuff. "But I have been informed that she was soon separated from Lord Overbury—why, I can't tell you—and went to live abroad: in Russia, I think. She was said to be a lady of very strange character; not a very estimable person, I take it, though of remarkable beauty, so people agreed, and of noble family—one of the Pomfrets—a daughter of Lord Bannerville's."

"But you know that Lord Overbury has since married Miss Darlington?"

"I've heard of that—a marriage in the Scotch form." Then he added, suddenly, "Ah! you want to know if Miss Darlington is free to marry again?"

It was clear that he thought me a suitor of Rosetta's; and, as I judged, the idea was pleasant to him. His looks brightened; he was smiling again. It then occurred to me that he had possibly long suspected my affection for Rachel; had been jealous of me, had sought to keep me apart from her, on that account. He had thought me unworthy of her, perhaps? I could not complain of

that. Or did he love her himself? Surely that was too absurd.

But now the notion that I loved not Rachel, but Rosetta, was very welcome to him, and relieved his mind exceedingly. Such at any rate was my view of his sudden change of manner.

“It may be well to ascertain the particulars of Miss Darlington’s marriage. I take it to be void. I think Lady Overbury still survives. But it’s worth looking into. Miss Darlington is, perhaps, anxious to marry again, and no doubt she has many admirers—suitors. All agree that she is a most fascinating actress. That will be my own opinion, I dare say; only I’ve seen so many fascinating actresses. And then she receives a large salary, I’m informed. That adds greatly to her attractions. Actress’s husbands look very sharp after their salaries; so I’ve heard.”

I did not care to pursue the subject further. I inquired after Miss Monck. She was well, Vickery thanked me. I tried to bring him again to the story of Sir George’s early life. But he was not in a communicative mood. He persisted that he had told all he knew; that there was nothing more to tell. I asked if he had any news of Tony? No, he had no news.

But in the course of a few days news came, and very bad news.

My mother wrote briefly to say that Tony was very ill, that his state was indeed alarming. He had expressed a desire to see me; and she begged me to start forthwith for the Down Farm.



## CHAPTER X.

### MY BOY-FRIEND.

IN my position as Sir George's assistant I could hardly quit London without his sanction. I sought him in his studio and explained my wishes. He listened patiently, and at length consented to my departure, but rather reluctantly, I thought. He was in a languid, listless mood, reclining in his easy chair. His eyes were heavy and his face very sallow. There was an open book on the floor at his feet ; as though he had carelessly thrown it down, after vainly seeking amusement in its pages. His palette, ready prepared, with its semi-circle of mounds of fresh colour, and a sheaf of clean brushes, rested on a small table beside him ; but he had not been at work apparently. There was no glisten of wet paint on the canvas fronting him.

“ You can go, Duke, of course, if it must be so. A sick friend, you say ? The young man you men-

tioned to me some time since? Yes, I remember. And he is very ill, you fear; dying, it may be? Poor fellow! I'm sorry to hear it. And yet, perhaps, if all were known, he's rather to be envied than pitied. 'He whom the gods love dies young.' But he's your friend, you tell me. Well, you must go to him, I suppose. It's not because you've grown home-sick—weary of being here? You're sure? I shall miss you, Duke; you're wanted here, remember. I'm obliged to rely more than ever upon my assistants, for, somehow, I can't work as I used to. I don't see that your going can do much good. You're not a doctor, you know. He's well cared for, I suppose, in the country. Does this Down Farm of yours lose its magic in your absence? But you've set your heart upon going, I see. Have you money enough? No ceremony, please. Well, come back as soon as you can."

He spoke with effort and his voice sounded faint and hollow. He passed a tremulous hand across his weary eyes, then held it pressed against his forehead.

"You are in pain, Sir George?"

"It's nothing," he answered rather petulantly. I was quitting him.

"Stay," he said, rousing himself and speaking

in firmer tones. "Let this thing be understood between us, Duke. You come back here; you promise. Whatever happens, you come back here. I have your word for that. I trust you may find your friend better than you expect. The account you have received of him is perhaps exaggerated. People in the country always exaggerate. They live in a world of small events, and view them through magnifying glasses. And they like to send bad news. It reflects importance upon the senders. You can write to me if you will. Yet, no. Don't write. Letters are always a nuisance, and make great mischief. I can't write them, and I hate to receive them. I won't ask, therefore, even for yours. But come back to me, yourself, and let me see you as soon as may be, whatever happens; remember that. Now, good-bye."

So I left him.

Mole kindly accompanied me to the Golden Cross and witnessed my departure by the early coach for Dripford. I spoke to him of Sir George. He shook his head significantly.

"He's in a queer way, very queer. I don't know what to make of him. He suffers much at times, I think, and he has increased his daily dose of laudanum. It relieves him for a while; but a

terrible depression follows. There's no help for it, however. And I suppose it's no affair of yours or mine."

My uncle met me at Dripford. He looked grave and anxious, and much older, I thought. There was increase of age in the slowness of his movements, in his apparent disinclination for speech. For the old are not so garrulous as many suppose; they are as often taciturn, with abstracted eyes, turned, as it were, towards distant things, the past or the future; these seeming more immediate to them, perhaps, than the present.

He received me with a sort of subdued kindliness, answering my questions very briefly, as he drove slowly towards Purrington.

He was well and my mother was well. Poor Tony was sinking, it was feared, though for the last day or two there had been little perceptible change in his condition. Dr. Turton, from Steepleborough, had been in constant attendance, and though he declined to speak confidently, held out but slight hopes of his patient's recovery. He was very weak.

"It's a sad business," said my uncle, "and so we all feel it. There's not a soul upon the farm that hasn't got to care for the poor lad. He'd

always a good word or a kind look for everybody. So young as he is, too! Your mother's been grieving sorely over him; it's almost as though he were her own son. Yet she's known him but for a little while, after all. In truth, the boy's almost a stranger to us. He's neither kith nor kin of ours. But she's grown uncommonly fond of him somehow. She'd always a tender heart, poor soul."

He was silent for some time after this. Evidently he was much depressed, but he did not care to show his feelings. He had always held himself in the background, as it were, distrusting his right to occupy attention, desiring rather to escape notice. Yet it had seemed some relief to him to speak of my mother's sorrow, as though he obtained in such wise outlet for his own.

The farm was doing fairly, he said, in reply to my inquiries. At any rate he was as well off as his neighbours, and had no particular reason to complain. Corn was high and in demand, and he had sold his wool for a better price than he had obtained for some years past. The sheep looked well, and he had a good stock of food for them. Altogether he hoped to get through the winter months pretty comfortably.

Then I brought him back again to the subject of Tony.

They had thought him but an ailing lad from the first. "When you brought him down, Duke," said my uncle, "it seemed to me he'd such a white, London face, and so slight a frame, that there was little promise of long life about him. The poor boy had no strength—was so scant of breath—and was for putting his hand to his side after the slightest exertion." But they fancied he had improved after a while. There had come some healthy colour into his cheeks, and he walked with a firmer step. "His heart had always been light and full of life, and his eyes, I've noticed, have been often as bright as stars. He'd a blithe and cheery way with him—was very merry at times—and enlivened the old house wonderfully. You being away, Duke, it was very pleasant to have him about us. The young seem meant, somehow, I think, to comfort the old, in the matter of gay speech and bright looks. Perhaps we shouldn't ask or expect much more of them than that. And then he was never tired of singing your praises, Duke, and you may judge that your mother didn't grow weary of listening to him." But soon a change had come. As the autumn air grew more and more

keen and chill, and a look of coming winter darkened the landscape, he had faded and withered like a hothouse flower in a frost. His decline since had been rapid. His strength had given way completely. He was so weak now that he could scarcely stand without assistance.

“ We might have sent to you before, Duke ; but of what use was it ? You could do nothing—and we didn’t like to give over hoping. We kept thinking—or trying to think—that it was but a bad cold—an attack he might rally from, and shake off. He’s so young, you see—and one can’t quite believe that death will take the young when there are so many old about—ready, waiting, almost anxious for him. But it is to be, I fear. The poor boy’s but a shadow of what he was—and he was slight enough then, surely. He weighs but a trifle. I carry him down-stairs, at times—and I’m shocked at finding how light he grows. I lift him as easily as though he were a mere child. It’s a sad business, as I said. But he doesn’t suffer much, I think—at least he doesn’t complain. I doubt if he knows his danger ; and we haven’t the courage, none of us, to tell him of it. Not but what he’s a brave heart, I think, for all he looks such a boy. And he’s so grateful for all that’s done for him. God knows

he's welcome to it all; and it's little enough; for what can we do, after all? and who could refuse help in such case?"

There were tears in his eyes as he spoke. As we neared Purrington he had grown more talkative; he became, perhaps, more accustomed to my presence, and found that there was a sort of comfort in giving sorrow words. Yet each sentence fell from him slowly, as though doled out reluctantly, and every now and then he lapsed into silence again, and it was only with an effort he would recommence speech.

"You must be prepared to find him much changed, Duke." But I had gathered as much already from his simple statements. "Not but what there's a flush in his face, at times, that looks almost like health, only it's too bright in colour, and it comes and goes so quickly. He's carried down-stairs most days—though he'd be better in bed to my thinking, for the dressing exhausts him so—and he sits in the easy chair by the fireside in the little room. He's out of draughts there, and in nobody's way, and we keep him there as warm and comfortable as we can. Your mother's constantly at his side, and seems never tired of doing all she may for him. It's a way women have, you know,



with the sick and helpless. If nursing and tending him could alter matters he'd soon be sound and strong again. But I scarcely dare hope that. It reminds me—when I see the poor boy sitting there wrapped up by the fire—of old times, when you, Duke, were an ailing child, struck down with fever or what not. Your mother thinks that, too, perhaps, and Kem as well, may be—women take count of these things more than we do, you know. They open their hearts to them and set great store upon them. And then this poor boy—I call him a boy, for he's that to one of my years, though he's of your own age, I dare say, but then sickness makes children of people, if not so young they're as feeble—this poor boy, I was saying, is an orphan, it seems. Never saw his mother's face, that he remembers, so I learn; that makes the women very pitiful to him, and tender and compassionate. They think that, so young as he is, and so stricken, he should have a mother to see to him, and smooth his pillow, and take him to her heart; that sets them striving to fill her place and do her duty by him; hoping, perhaps, that if she can look upon them from beyond the grave, she'll thank and bless them and give them her prayers; and that any how they're sure of reward in Heaven. Not that they

do it reckoning upon that or by way of buying aught for themselves by-and-by. It's no sacrifice to them. They've too much comfort in it for that, perhaps. But—I don't know why I talk of such things—for I'm not sure I've got them rightly understood in my own mind; and I can't, therefore, make them any way clear to you—but women have more religion—of a sort—than we have, Duke. And whatever we may think of it, it seems sufficient unto them, and to benefit and to gladden them greatly."

He had been talking in a musing, self-communing way, scarcely conscious, as it seemed, of my presence, although he had occasionally mentioned my name, as though really addressing himself to me. But he had done this mechanically, I think, for the most part.

"Now you can see the farm house," he said presently. "When we get on a little further you'll be able to make out your mother standing by the front gate. She's been looking for your coming this long time past, I'll warrant."

Sure enough there she was. And soon she was clasping me tenderly in her arms.

"Duke, my boy!" She could say no more.

She looked very wan, I thought, and her hair

was now quite white. A hungry sort of joy seemed to dance in her eyes at the sight of me.

“You’re well, mother? and Tony?”

Her face saddened, she sighed and shook her head significantly.

“You shall see him—he’ll be so pleased—in one moment. But—let me look at you, Duke—I do think you’re growing still.”

She wrung my hands. Then she seemed moved by a sort of devout gratitude, which surely could not be counted as merely selfishness, that I was yet well and strong, and not as my poor sinking friend; that I was spared to her, and likely to be; and that she need not fear for my safety. But this was only for a minute.

“Poor boy, he’ll be so glad. He has been so longing to see you. He has so set his heart upon it. Don’t ask me how he is; I don’t know, I daren’t think. You must see him and judge for yourself. Hope? I can’t say; we can only pray, Duke; that, perhaps, will enable us to hope.”

She led the way into the house, carefully closing the door after her, avoiding noise, and shutting out the cold wind.

“Well, Duke, old fellow; how good of you to come!”

Tony was sitting, as my uncle had said, wrapped up by the fireside in the little room I so well remembered. I had prepared my lessons there—ages ago, as it seemed—for Mr. Bygrave.

His voice sounded toneless and hollow, yet there was life in his manner and bright light in his eyes; they looked very large, his face was so thin; his hair, I noticed, had grown long, and its flaxen curls clustered about his neck. He tried to rise, but I gently restrained him, for I knew how weak he was. He gave me his hand, it was burning hot, and so thin and transparent, it had the look of white wax.

“I’m a good deal pulled down, as you see, Duke. I’ve grown thinner than ever; I know it by the way my clothes hang so loosely about me; and my ring slips off my finger now; it never used to, you know, it fitted tightly once; my strength has gone from me suddenly, I can’t tell you how. If I could only get that back again, I should do well enough. Beyond that there is not really much the matter with me.”

My mother was watching my face, trying to read there what I thought of his state. It seemed to me, as I stood beside him, quite hopeless. For

his strength failing him, it was his life, he should have said. He was dying.

"How good of you to come," he repeated. "But it's only like yourself. I knew you'd come—though it was but to humour a whim of mine. That's why I didn't send to you before. It seemed hardly right, for so poor a matter, to bring you this long way. So much as you've to do in London, too. How is the dear smoky old city looking? No cleaner or wholesomer, I daresay. But I can't love the place the less on that score. Not but what I love the country, too. I've good cause. Your mother, Duke, I can't tell you how good she's been to me. But I've no need to tell you. You know her—you know it already. I couldn't believe people could be so kind. But they saw how sick and faint and broken down I was, and then their good kind hearts wouldn't rest until they'd done all they could to set me on my legs again. And I shall be better soon, I daresay; at least I hope so. Your coming so kindly and promptly, old fellow, has made me feel better already, done me more good than all the doctor's physic. And what have you been doing, Duke, all this long while? You've been wonderfully busy, of course; and what are your plans for the future? I've such a lot of

things to talk to you about and to tell you of. Don't mind my teasing you with questions. Now you've come you must sit beside my easy chair ; for it seems odd, Duke, but I can hardly stand without help ; as for moving about, that's not to be managed anyhow—so you must sit beside me, and have a long, long talk with me."

But the excitement of seeing me, and the efforts he made thereupon, were bad for him, my mother judged. Upon some excuse she drew me from the room, promising that I should soon return.

"Well, Duke—you think—? Yes, I see. I don't wonder that you're grieved. I couldn't but send for you. Thank God, you came."

I felt, as she felt, that in a little while it would have been too late.

"Has no one else been informed or sent for?"

"He has no father, no mother, Duke."

"But he has a cousin—Miss Rachel Monck."

"She is here, Duke."

"You sent for her?"

"I was about to send when she arrived. Something in his last letter to her—it was but a few lines written hurriedly in pencil—the fatigue of dipping his pen in the ink has been almost more than he could bear—something she read alarmed

her—though it was not meant to do so—and she came.”

“You have made her welcome, mother?”

“Need you ask me, Duke?”

## CHAPTER XI.

### PARTED.

I WAS again under the same roof with Rachel.

We met, I remember, on the wide landing of the old oaken staircase of the farm-house.

It was evening, after an angry sunset; a boisterous wind had torn the clouds into ragged strips and shreds; the flushed horizon was fast fading and darkening. As she stood by the casement window, however, a stream of dusky light fell upon her face, and I could see that she was very pale, that her lips quivered, and that her eyes shone with a feverish brightness. I murmured some few words of welcome to her. She thanked me with a smile that was yet very sad and plaintive, and gave me her hand. For some moments she could not speak.

"You are surprised, no doubt, to find me here, Mr. Nightingale," she said at length, in a sort of parched, fatigued, toneless voice. "And, indeed,



it was very bold of me to come. But I felt sure of compassion and forgiveness. And what else could I do? My anxiety would not let me rest. I could not even write. My hand shook so, my eyes grew dim, and my heart—how it ached! I had been for many days without news of him; and when, at last, news came—it told me so little—it seemed to hide from me so much! The letter was very brief, but my fears added lines and lines to it, and revealed to me the worst of tidings. I could not but come with all haste. I did right, did I not? I am sure you will not blame me. My poor boy is so dear to me. And you are all so good and kind, so full of pity for him and for me, too. But how sad it all is! How very, very sad! It breaks my heart to think of it.” Her voice failed her and she averted her face. Presently she asked, very faintly, without turning to me, “You have seen him? And you find him greatly changed? You think him in great danger?”

“Indeed, I fear so.”

“You think there is no hope?”

“But little, I fear. Indeed, Miss Monck, I would say otherwise, if I only could.” She was swaying to and fro, as though impatient under the suffering my answer had inflicted upon her.

"I know, I know. I am the only one that dares to hope. I must, I cannot but hope, and yet you are his friend!" This was said almost bitterly. "He clings to you; he has been asking for you so many times; he has been so longing to see you. 'Has Duke come yet? When will Duke be here?' Poor boy, he can think of nothing else. It is strange how firm a place you hold in his heart. And yet you can so easily resign all hope! Well, I'll hope still to the last, though I am left alone to hope. Yes, and I'll pray, too; I'll pray, too."

There was despair in her accents. She scarcely knew what she said, I am sure. In her sore trouble her love had become cruelly jealous. It angered her to think that I had obtained a share of her cousin's affection. She yearned to possess his whole heart.

"I have seen so little of him of late. And he wrote so seldom. He did not know—how should he? that his letters were most precious to me. But he might have guessed that—made sure of it. And when he wrote, it was such a very, very few lines. His long letters were for you. You, it seems, are more, much more, to him than I am—though you are almost a stranger to him. You have known him but a little while, and I have loved him all my

life. He is my brother. I can remember him as far back as I can remember anything; and surely he cannot have forgotten. We were children together. It seems an age since he left me. Why did you come between us to part us? It was your doing. I did not complain. I thought it was for his advantage, and so I bore it—as I have borne other trials—finding strength, I can't tell how. But, oh! how wrong it all was! This bitter cold country, the cruel bleak wind that blows here, it has killed him. Can't you see that? He came here to meet his death. Why, why did you suffer it? Why did you do this wicked thing? Had you no pity, no mercy, for him, if not for me?"

She spoke wildly and impetuously, and yet not noisily. The passion of her grief seemed so intense as for the moment to deprive her of strength to express it fully. Her voice had sunk almost to a whisper. Her whole frame seemed trembling with nervous excitement. I feared that she was fainting, and stretched out my arm to support her. But she shrank from me and leant against the balusters, clutching them tightly with her quivering fingers as she panted for breath.

I was greatly distressed. Something I en-

deavoured to say in exculpation of myself—in reply to the unjust, unreasonable charge that she had brought against me.

“Yes, yes; you did it for the best. I know that. I am not accusing you—not really accusing you; but only see what has come of your interference! Look at my poor boy now! How pale, how weak and worn he is! He was not like that when you took him from me. He was well then. He would be well now, if you had but left him to me; at least he was not so very ill—he did not suffer: there was no danger, or thought of danger. But now—now——”

She winced, and closed her eyes as though to avoid some too painful spectacle. I was silent; I could say nothing to soothe her in this paroxysm of her sorrow. Pained but not offended at what she had said—for, indeed; I could not hold her accountable for her vehement words—I was leaving her. In her present mood the sight of me seemed only to wound and irritate her. She had spoken cruelly of me, but I could not complain. I sympathised too wholly with her suffering; I pitied her with all my heart.

She wrung her hands, and her form writhed. She seemed wrestling with her anguish, as though

it was some living and palpable opponent ; and now her tears began to fall fast.

“Stay,” she said, suddenly, in a sobbing voice. “Don’t leave me, Mr. Nightingale. I have been talking like a mad creature. I feel like one at times. But you mustn’t heed what I said. Do what I may to hinder them, bitter thoughts will come into my mind ; harsh words will fall from my lips. It’s for a moment only. Then I am myself again ; ashamed of my weakness, and pained, and sorry, as you see me now. Say that you forgive me. Let me be sure of it. Give me your hand in token that you forgive me, and will forget the wicked nonsense I’ve been talking. I did not, I could not, really mean it. You are his firm, true friend ; and mine too. He loves you tenderly ; surely that’s reason sufficient why I should ever respect and esteem you ! And in other ways I owe you so much. You have always been so kind and considerate. I could never be really ungrateful to you ! I should not be so, even in seeming, for a moment, but that my brain whirls—my heart throbs so. I suffer more than I can bear almost. But I will bear it, and bravely, you shall see. Be sure, I will not speak to you so again ; only say that you forgive me.”

Poor Rachel! with an effort she recovered herself, and brushed the tears from her face. Her voice resumed its wonted musical tone, and gradually she mastered the passion which had so strangely stirred her.

She was composed again, with wistful, penitential looks imploring my pity and forgiveness. It was more than I needed. I was grieved, indeed, that she should address me so beseechingly on such a subject. I felt that I had nothing to forgive; that she could do nothing I could not forgive; that I loved her more absolutely than ever, although it might be more hopelessly. Briefly and hurriedly I laboured to soothe and ~~compose~~ her, as far as I might. I assured her that her reproaches were natural enough, even though they did me some injustice; that at such a moment I could not expect from her complete control over her agony of grief; that it was best she should give her sorrow words—any words, the first that occurred to her. I sought to convince her that her charges had not really disquieted me, and should hold no place in my memory. Her sorrows were mine, I said, and I promised to hope with her, and to join in her prayers for the recovery of her poor Tony. So I left her, calm and appeased somewhat, I think.

Such want of accord as had existed between us was, at any rate, over.

It was plain to me, however, that my poor boy-friend had but a little while to live—that day by day he was weakening and sinking. How deeply this afflicted me, I need not say. I may not dwell upon the subject. It was almost my first experience of real sorrow. I felt that I was for ever passing from the sunshine into the shade of life. I now began to perceive how very dear he was to me. It was true, as Rachel had reminded me, that my friendship with him had been but of brief duration—was to be numbered by months rather than by years. Yet of what worth and consequence it had been to me! How he had cheered my desolate state in London; in how many ways he had brightened my existence! I thought fondly of his airy talk, his bright manner, his engaging frankness, his pleasant smile, his kindness on every occasion. There had never been a moment's disunion between us. Even his little dandy airs, and boyish foibles of that kind, I thought tenderly of.

- They were hardly to be counted as affectations;
- they were rather natural exuberances of his genial, sprightly nature, and quite innocent in themselves. No one was more conscious of their absurdity, or

readier to join in laughing at them, than he was himself. I would not, if I could, have had him other than he was. And his friendship had been of real service to me. At least, from him I had learnt something of myself. I am not speaking only of the fond praise he was so prompt to lavish upon me and my productions in art and in literature. This was excessive, as I know and knew then. But it was inspiriting and encouraging, nevertheless. It had been, I think, without mischievous result. It was only sympathy urged towards extravagance. And, seeing how my early days had been passed, I derived from it unspeakable comfort and support. Moreover, our many conversations, though, doubtless, they had often been boyish and foolish enough, had yet an intellectual and aspiring leaven. The ambitions we had taught each other to cherish might be vain, but they were not contemptible, or in the slightest degree unworthy. In truth, our friendship had opened to us new studies and experiences—had helped us on towards manhood, nerving our efforts and developing our resources.

But all this was over now. For the first time “never more,”—that burthen of the song of life—a whisper at its beginning—a deafening chorus at its



close—was to sound in my ears. Poor Tony was doomed. I had to learn the bitterness and sadness of mortality.

I would not be thought to over-estimate my sorrows. Let it be remembered how young I still was, and that youth is the season of friendship, and of sentiment tending to excess. What manner of man Tony might have become had he lived, how far my relations with him would have stood the tests of time and the chances and changes of life, I need not try to conjecture. He was little more than a boy when Death took him from me. His departure was to me most lamentable. His memory is very dear to me. Years have since passed, but I cannot think of him, even now, without a heart-ache.

Doctor Turton came over frequently from Steepleborough. With professional reticence he had long refrained from expressing any distinct opinion upon the state of his patient. He had indeed refused to avow that the case was without hope. But reserve had now become quite unavailing. It was plain to us that Tony's illness could have but one termination. And now the doctor confessed that medical art was baffled; that he could do nothing more; and that the end was at hand.

Our circle of friends and neighbours was very

small; but all shared our sorrows. Somehow all had made Tony's acquaintance, and been drawn towards him, and regarded him tenderly. There were many enquiries at the farm-house gate as to how he fared—and later, as to how he had passed the night, and whether the morning had brought any ray of hope to us. Farmer Jobling, I remember, was a frequent visitor, although he always refused to enter the house, lest his creaking boots should disturb the invalid. And he brought with him offerings of late fruit and flowers—for the garden at the Home Farm was more sheltered than our own. "It's but a poor time of year for nose-gays, Master Duke," he said, subduing his sturdy voice to a husky whisper. "And there's main few flowers left. But we've a few asters still—and some late daisies and chrysanthemums—we'd rather a show of them this year—and one little bit of a rose. I never knew one blow so late—but the season was backward, you know—it's only a poor thing, but the missus begged me bring it." The last rose my poor friend will ever see, I thought. Alas! For him every thing now seemed to be for the last time. "And here, Master Duke," continued the farmer, "is a little basket of grapes I begged of Lady Rockbury's gardener—I met him at market, only

Tuesday last. I call it a pretty bunch. If the poor lad don't care to taste 'em—though I'll warrant 'em sound and sweet ; they used to be famous for their grapes at Hurlstone Castle—perhaps the sight of them may cheer him a bit. I wish the flowers were finer—but it's the best I could manage." Indeed there was no fault to find with the nosegay. The farmer, for all his roughness of speech, and of manner, had rare taste and skill as a gardener. I never knew anyone arrange flowers more adroitly. His cleverness in that way was as a natural gift. "It's a sad time for you all, Master Duke. How does the poor lad find himself this morning? No worse? Well that's something. We've all got fond of him somehow—the missus is quite in a way about him—for all he's a Londoner ; though of course that don't count for anything at such a time. Our hearts are with you, Master Duke—and please God, the boy will get hearty again. That's all I can say."

The clergyman from Purrington often came over also, and Tony was prayed for in church amid the solemn stillness and deep sympathy of the congregation.

Among the labourers and servants of the farm much sorrow prevailed. Some even testified their

regard by bringing indiscreet presents of mushrooms found upon the down. Others tendered gifts of plover's eggs and heather-scented honey. There was a general anxiety to discourage needless noise. Reube even muzzled his sheep-dogs, so that they should not bark in the night.

Tony fought hard with the malady that was surely overcoming him. He declined to be regarded as an invalid. Though so weak as to be unable to stand alone, he insisted upon being dressed every day. He could no longer bear the fatigue of being carried down-stairs. He was borne to an easy chair, placed at the window when the sun was shining, and wheeled afterwards to the fireside. Apparently, he did not yet know of his danger. At least, so we thought; and we consulted together as to whether he should or not be informed of his real condition. But on this head we were spared further anxiety.

He had spoken little of late of regaining his strength and getting well again. I was sitting alone with him. He had been silent for some time, and I forbore to address him, for I saw that conversation fatigued him. He was content with my being beside him; and as he watched the fire he had fallen into a musing state. He was in no pain; there was even a faint smile upon his wan face.

“Do you remember, Duke, drawing up my will?” he asked, at length; “and my executing it, and you and your uncle and mother attesting my signature? It was a right thing to do, and yet there seemed something absurd about it then. I don’t know. Do we ever think of things without knowing that we’re thinking of them? It would almost seem so. Certainly, I had little thought of dying then. But if I’d been dying, and knew it, I could have done no more. I’m very glad I made that will. For, you know, I have to think of dying now. It’s not so much that I myself feel death to be near, for, indeed, it seems to me there’s quite a store of life in my heart, Duke; but I read fear, and bad news, and hopelessness, somehow, in the faces about me. They are kind good faces too, and they break the bad news to me very tenderly. But still it’s there. And so, I gather, I’m to die. Don’t speak, Duke, please. I’m so wretchedly weak that I shall lose hold of what I want to say, which is clear to me now, or was a moment ago. I’m sorry, dear old boy, of course. For I’m so young, as you know, and life’s been very pleasant to me, and seemed to promise so much more that would be pleasant in the future. It’s hard to give it all up. There were so many things I wanted to do. I’d so many plans

to carry out. I was always given to planning and looking forward, you know, It's really hard to think that all that's over, for ever. But so it must be, Duke. And my life—what a poor brief life it's been!—is to end almost before it's fairly begun. But I'm not complaining, old fellow. Things are all ordered for the best, I don't doubt. Very likely if I were to live I should only be a disappointment to myself, as well as to others. And by others, I mean you chiefly, Duke. I should fail the more, perhaps, the longer I lived. But it wasn't so much of myself I wanted to speak, though I know I shouldn't tire you—you're so good to me—even if I went on talking ever so on that subject. It was of Rachel. It's on her account I'm glad I made the will. An illness like mine, you see, Duke, makes one serious in spite of oneself. I've been thinking over many things that otherwise would very likely have escaped me altogether. Rachel—dear good sweet little soul that she is! has been occupying my attention a good deal of late. And last night we had a talk together over the fire, she and I, just as we used to do years ago, I remember, when we were little bits of children. What a while ago that seems! And yet it's not so very long since, either."

He stopped, and half closing his eyes, fell into a musing, dreamy state. I forbore to disturb him, and again we sat silent for some time.

“What was I saying, Duke?” he asked presently.

“You mentioned your cousin Rachel—Miss Monck.”

“True. It’s of her I wanted to speak to you.”

## CHAPTER XII.

“GOOD BYE!”

“POOR Rachel came and sat with me last night. She couldn't sleep, she said, and, as you know, I don't sleep very well. So we had a long chat together. She'd been wanting for some time, it seems, to talk to me about her father's affairs. I knew he did not leave them in a very flourishing condition, but I wasn't quite prepared, I own, to hear all she had to tell me. Naturally it distressed her very much, poor child. My uncle died a ruined man. It's a chance if there's anything left for Rachel, though Vickery, I believe, like a good old fellow, as he is, means to try and save something for her out of the wreck. But that isn't all. My will, which we thought to be rather a joke at the time, proves even now to have had a suspicion of absurdity about it. I fancied I'd really something to leave, you know. It seems I hadn't. My little



property has gone. It stood in my uncle's name as surviving trustee, and—well, he was quite welcome to it. I wish it had been of more help to him than it seems to have been. But it pained Rachel very much to tell me this, as you may suppose. She thought I had been unfairly used; and yet how could she reproach her father, whom she loved so dearly? She couldn't in words, you know; and yet to accuse him even in thought, and perhaps she couldn't altogether avoid doing that, troubled her sorely. It seemed a wrong done to his memory. There was something sacrilegious about it. One can't blame the dead, they're so helpless: they can't answer or explain—and she loved him so! Then she talked of working hard, and at some distant date, far distant of course, paying me back—making good, she called it—the money that's gone. Well, I wouldn't listen to that; and I said and did all I could to comfort her. I told her of the will I'd made—thanks to you, old fellow—leaving her all I possessed, or thought I possessed. I explained to her, or tried to, that the money was therefore really her own, all along—to do what she liked with, to hand to my uncle, if she had so pleased. And that there was nobody to be blamed in the matter; that my intentions had been antici-

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pated, that was all. I couldn't quite get her to see it as I wanted her to; but I think she was relieved in some measure. I dwelt expressly upon her poor father's unvarying kindness to me, and how grateful I felt for it. And I assured her again and again that the money was quite at his service, and that at the merest hint that he had needed it, I would cheerfully have made it all over to him. I added that it wasn't likely I should feel the want of it now. But that didn't cheer her much. She's very tender-hearted—we've always been like brother and sister together—and she regards me most affectionately. I'm sure I've done little enough to deserve it. The thought of my death troubled her extremely."

"It's a pity, too," he added, after a pause. "I had looked forward to that money being a little provision for her. It's hard to go and leave her so poorly off as she must be. I do wish now that I'd settled down and been more industrious, and so had a little money of my own earning, to leave behind me. But it's vain wishing that. Poor Rachel! What's to become of her? I don't like to think. It seemed so cruel to leave her quite penniless and friendless. Of course old Vickery will stand by her to the last. But he's getting on in years is Vickery.

What's to happen—what's to become of her when he's gone?"

I begged him to be at ease on that head. While I lived, I assured him, Rachel should lack for nothing. So far as I might, I would constitute myself her guardian and protector. I would devote myself to promoting her welfare. Then, lest I had betrayed myself by speaking too warmly, I promised also my mother's interest on her behalf. If need should arise, I said, the Down Farm should always be her home in the future.

"How very good of you, Duke—and your mother! I'm sure a kinder soul never breathed. Do you know—this is but idle talk, yet I'll mention it, for it's on the tip of my tongue—I sometimes thought that you might take a fancy to Rachel. She's not beautiful, and she's led such a trying life, poor thing, that most likely she wouldn't be considered very attractive by people generally. Her manner's so staid and subdued, and she hasn't the winning, lively airs and ways that girls of her age usually have. Yet she's so good and pure-minded, and affectionate. A man couldn't choose for a wife one nobler, or better, really. But I know it's useless my talking like this. You esteem and respect Rachel, of course, no one that knows her could do

otherwise, but your heart, as you told me long since, is possessed by another. It can't be helped ; and yet it seems a pity too."

I longed to tell him of his error, to avow to him the love I cherished for Rachel. How I despised myself for my old unlucky passion ! Yet I had been proud of it once, and had revealed it very fully to him with boyish effusiveness. He had even envied me in regard to its romantic nature ! It seemed a poor and paltry thing enough now ; yet he still held fast to this old Rosetta episode in my story, and could not be convinced that it was ended for ever ; that it had been but a fatuous, feverish business while it lasted ; and that now I was quit of it altogether.

But I could not but be silent, however. If he were to know of my love, I felt that he would speak of it to Rachel, would, perhaps, intercede with her on my behalf, urging my suit upon her. And she, out of her love for him, able to deny him nothing, might be tempted to yield me her hand. I could not accept it on such terms. It was the free gift of her heart I sought. Her love, won by mine ; not given me for another's sake. This might be hopeless ; but it was this I sighed for.

So I held my peace ; the while I felt I

was denying him what he would have counted real comfort. I charged myself with cruelty to him. I was acting selfishly, with a duplicity and want of consideration for him opposed to the friendship I professed. And at such a time of all others! But I satisfied myself that it was best so; that, indeed, it must be so. I could not tell him that I loved Rachel as deeply and fervently as he could wish.

"It can't be helped," he repeated. "And, perhaps, one does wrong to be occupied with so many plans, and to be looking so far forward. Why need I busy myself about a future in which there can be no share for me? Yet, poor Rachel! She has had so little happiness. I should like to think that she would be well cared for by-and-by, with time for peace and rest, and with some good, honest man for her husband, who'd know her real worth, and would prize her, and do all he might to make her happy. That can't be you, Duke, old friend, it seems. I was wrong to think it could. One can't dispose of other people's hearts, or indulge in cut-and-dried schemes for their future."

It never once occurred to him, apparently, that Rachel did not love me: possibly could not be brought to love me. Nor did he, I think, suspect

that her heart was wholly in his own keeping. Once it had seemed to me that he entertained suspicion of this. But it was clear that he did not now.

“For another reason,” he said, presently, “I regret the loss of my small property. I wanted to make a few little presents to the folks here who’ve been so good to me. Kem and Reube, and the rest of them. There’s no one on the farm that hasn’t shown kindness to me in some way or other. God bless them for it! I wish I could repay them, in however trifling a degree. Somehow, it’s only by giving them money that one’s able to show what one really feels in such case. And the light purse I brought down here with me is very light indeed now. There’s but a very few shillings left in it. Still, I should not like them to think I’d forgotten them or was close-fisted with my money. I’ve never been that, as you know Duke; though I’m well assured that they didn’t do what they did, poor souls, for money, or in any thought of getting it, but out of simple kindness and goodness of heart. God bless them for it! I say again. And, Duke, dear old fellow, you must let me be your debtor once more. Give them each a little present, will you? What you think fit, and say it comes from me, and that I hadn’t forgotten them. The lie won’t be reckoned against



you : it will be charged to me. But we should both, in any case, be forgiven for it. And say something kind to them all in my name. I'd something more to tell you ; but I grow too weak. I must rest a while, I think. My voice is so faint, too ; I'm sure you can hardly make out what I say. There's a drink of some sort on the mantelpiece, isn't there ? Thank you ; that's better. And don't take away your hand, please, Duke, even if I doze for a little. I should like to be sure that you are still beside me when I wake up again. My time's so short now. I must make the most of it—though it's a shame, I feel, to tie you to my bedside like this. But you won't mind. I know there's no end to your kindness to me."

He had nothing of an invalid's querulousness, though now and then he was somewhat fanciful. He was especially anxious that the light should fall fully upon those about him, so that he might see their faces well. Yet he had to be sheltered from any glare, for his eyes had grown weak, and were soon wearied. And a nervous sensitiveness oppressed him. Any sudden sound jarred painfully upon his ear, and agitated him extremely. His voice was now very faint and hollow ; his breathing was difficult ; and, in speaking, he had often to

stop and rest for a few moments. In this way, sometimes, his ideas became disconnected, and he was unable to express all he had designed to say. Late at night his mind wandered a good deal, and he spoke unintelligibly. He was usually composed again in the morning, however.

In this state he lingered some days.

“I grow more and more sad, Duke, do you know, that I’ve so little to leave behind me—to give away, I mean. I shouldn’t like to be forgotten all at once—yet I can leave nothing to those who are dear to me, to remember me by. And they’ll need help to remember me. My life has been so brief, and so useless. But—I’ve spoken to Rachel about it—you must have my sketch-books, Duke, and that easel of mine—the mahogany one I mean—I left it in my chambers—my poor dear old chambers! I didn’t think when I shut the door on them, to come down here, that I was never to see them again! My paint-box, too, Duke, that must be yours. It’s only rubbish I’m giving you, or little better; yet I know you’ll care to have it, for my sake. There’s a desk standing on the small round table, beside the fire-place—I should like old Vickery to have that. I often plagued him, and

laughed at him, but he's a good old fellow really—and has been kind to Rachel. Then, for that queer friend of yours, who came one night and amused us so much—Mole—wasn't his name? I wish you'd see that he has my Shakespeare. It's odd how I cling to being remembered even by people I've scarcely known, and who've forgotten me already, perhaps. But so it is. Dr. Turton must have my watch and chain—you'll mind that. Dear me, I've little else left, I fear. Your uncle, Mr. Orme, wouldn't wear a ring, perhaps—no—but he'll accept kindly my little gold pencil-case, I daresay—and the ring must be for your mother, Duke. God bless her! I know she'll prize it on my account. I wish with all my heart it was a priceless diamond, and not the trumpery thing it really is. And that's all, I think. Or there may be a trifle or two more. I should like something to be found for any friend who'll care to have a souvenir of me. I owe a few pounds, I think. But the furniture in my chambers will fetch enough to pay my debts with. They can be but few, and of small amount. And Rachel—have I nothing left for her? But she'll not forget me, there's no fear of that."

This was the night before he died. The end came almost suddenly at last.

Rachel had been reading to him. A stream of wintry sunshine fell upon his bed, but the curtains were so arranged as to shade his face. He was lying very still, his hand lightly holding mine as I sat beside him. He was in no pain apparently; but his weakness was extreme.

He could scarcely heed, I think, what Rachel read; but her soft, musical tones seemed to soothe him.

I noted that his gaze was slowly turned now upon Rachel, now upon me. He had been silent for some time. All at once, as he watched us by turns, he gave a little start, and smiled brightly. I fancied, but I could not be sure, that he had for himself discovered my heart's secret, and learnt my love for Rachel.

He uttered a faint cry. Rachel closed her book,—it was the New Testament—and hurried towards him.

“Good bye!” he murmured very softly and tenderly. A little pressure of my hand, and then his fingers relaxed their grasp. His eyes were closed as though in sleep; there was still a smile upon his parted lips. All was over.

We were speechless; we could do nothing. We stood linked together by the poor dead boy,

not yet able to credit that he had really gone from us. It seemed more reasonable to believe that life would yet stir within him, and gleam again from his eyes ; that he would speak to us, if but once more, if but a word.

Softly my mother entered the room. She knelt down and tenderly rested her hand upon his heart. She rose with tearful eyes, stooped again to kiss him, and then lightly covered his face.

Presently she strewed flowers upon the bed and drew us from the room.

My poor boy-friend !

## CHAPTER XIII.

### A DISCLOSURE.

THE shadow of death had fallen upon the old farmhouse. Such deep sadness it had not known before, in all my memory of it. We moved about its darkened rooms as silently as we might, subduing our voices, when there was imperative need to speak, as though we deemed that poor Tony could hear us yet, and that his rest—his everlasting rest!—could be disturbed by stir or discourse of ours. We were numbed and stilled by our great sorrow. There was little attempt on the part of any one to offer consolation to the rest. It would have seemed an assumption of superior fortitude. But we drew together, supporting our grief by sharing it, deriving comfort from the sense of common sympathy and affection. My mother was perhaps the bravest of us. It was not her first experience of affliction. And I noted that more and more she took my poor

suffering Rachel to her heart, as though she had been some wounded or half-frozen bird, that could only be cherished back to life by warm tenderness and unremitting solicitude. My uncle was grave and very silent. In a sort of shamefaced way he stole out, now and then, to see to the welfare of his farm. For the demands of the life about us could not be denied or overlooked; although just then, in the immediate presence of our great trouble, it seemed hard that the world should be moving on so regardlessly, busied as ever, time flying, clocks striking, the birds singing, the sun shining, just as though nothing had happened, and no cruel weight of woe had fallen with crushing violence upon our hearts. This was of course in the first freshness of our grief. Time would prove, as ever, the true and sure nepenthe; the passing days, dark and cruel as they seemed, would yet leave with us resignation and relief, force to endure, and, at last, almost forgetfulness of our sorrow. Our burthen would grow perceptibly lighter; or would seem to do so, as increase of strength and courage came to us, and we learnt how strenuously nature fights against affliction, and interdicts despair.

My mother found among her treasure two little

lockets of old-fashioned device; she gave one to me, to Rachel the other. Each enclosed a light lock of the dead boy's hair.

He was buried in the sunniest corner of Purrington churchyard—away from the shadow of the cold grey tower, and the gloomy ghostly old yew tree—with the sweet, fresh, down breezes blowing freely upon his grave. The funeral was of a simple, almost of a homely sort; but it was not the less touching on that score. The coffin was borne to the church, along the rude road across the down, upon the shoulders of our farm servants, in accordance with their earnest request. They carried a light burthen enough, but they relieved each other at intervals on the way, so that all might join in this tribute of regard for the departed. Rachel, her hand clasped in my mother's, followed the funeral. She was almost overwhelmed with grief, blanched, and very tremulous, but she had nerved herself for the effort, and she found courage to accomplish it. Of the little crowd assembled round the grave, there were none, even to the poorest, that had not contrived somehow to exhibit a scrap of crape or black ribbon in evidence of sympathy and regret. Nor were tears and sobs lacking. When the service concluded, Rachel stood at the



brink of the grave and let some few wintry flowers fall upon the coffin-lid—my mother had thoughtfully provided them with that object—all, I noted, drew back a pace or two, as though recognising her superior right to mourn, in that she alone was kindred to the dead. A moment, and then, as her figure seemed to sway and a faint cry broke from her, my mother advanced and gently drew her away. One by one we took our last look at the open grave, and then sadly and slowly wended our way homewards again.

I had written to Sir George, informing him of the loss I had sustained in the death of my friend, and requesting permission to remain some days longer in the country. I received no reply to my letter.

I had no desire to indulge morbidly in sorrow. I was conscious that occupation would yield comfort; that hard work and the resumption of my ordinary method of life would be best for me. Still my distress was very great; the sense of my bereavement was new and most keen. I had not been disciplined in suffering of this kind. Grief seemed to me, at this time, the rightful tenant of my heart, not to be ousted without grave injustice and ingratitude to Tony's claims upon my love and my remembrance.

Any effort to turn my thoughts from him seemed a violence done to our friendship—an outrage of his memory. He was surely entitled to my sorrow now, seeing how completely he had been possessed of my affection in the past. The while I recognised a certain unwisdom in my melancholy, I yet clung to it. The thought of returning to London became odious to me. I had lost heart and appetite for work.

So I lingered some weeks in the country, then gleaming under the fond, yet somewhat desponding smiles of a St. Martin's summer. The garden was a litter of leaves. The woods and coverts about Overbury Hall, as the declining sun-rays touched them, awoke from sombre browns and greys into rich tints of golden bronze, bright orange, and rich purple. The heavy dews of night and morning lent lustre to the meadows. The fields were bare, but their ribbed surfaces wore not as yet winter's look of bleakness and desolation, but were flushed with warm colour and pleasant diversities of light and shade. Something in the pensive tender aspect of the landscape and of the season harmonised with my mood, soothing and relieving me.

Rachel had been anxious to quit the farm-house and journey back to London, her home, as she

called it, poor child ! She feared lest she should seem to tax our hospitality unduly ; her sense of gratitude was so earnest and intense that she almost recoiled from receiving further kindness at our hands. She felt, perhaps, that the debt she had incurred was more than she could repay ; there was a guileless kind of pride contained in her deep and touching humility. Something, too, she may have been moved by a desire to depart, so that she might hide her wounds even from our reverent eyes. She longed for the solitude to be secured in a crowded city. Suffering had made her so nervously sensitive that it pained her to think that she was thought of. But my mother would not hear of her quitting us, and interposed kindly but firmly to prevent it. Indeed it was clear that she had not strength for the journey. She was very weak and ailing, almost worn out with sorrow and suffering.

Let me state honestly that it was not Rachel's presence in the farm-house that kept me there. I loved her with tender devotion ; but it was not a time to think of love—still less to speak of it. I saw her but rarely. I was never alone with her. For days she was confined to her room. And it was piteous to look upon her white wasted face ; to hear her faint broken tones. Her distress was

extreme, and it was the more affecting in that she bore it so meekly and uncomplainingly, striving, indeed, so far as she might, to bear up against and overcome it. But her heart seemed to have perished within her; it was dead and buried in her cousin's grave. My only comfort was in noting my mother's exquisite tenderness for the suffering girl. In this way, it seemed to me, my own love for her found indirect expression.

The days passed, I scarcely know how. A simple cross of white marble, bearing a brief inscription, was erected over Tony's grave. I wandered to and fro, pausing at various points associated with his memory. Here—resting his book upon the gate—he had stood to make a drawing of the farm-house. There he had sketched the old barn, with Overbury Park and the church tower in the distance. And so on. He had never completed the drawings. They were slight and unequal—yet full of pleasant promise and suggestiveness. How like his own life! What had that been but a graceful sketch?

My uncle was growing uneasy, I perceived, by his mute contemplation of me, and his embarrassed way of toying with his snuff-box.

“I've been wanting to speak to you for some

days past, Duke," he said at length. "But I've deferred it from time to time. I may as well say it now perhaps as at any other time."

He had met me on the steps leading into the garden.

"We're glad that you should be here, Duke, of course; that I need not tell you; though God knows the cause of your coming has been sad enough to us all. The poor boy's death has been a shock to you, such as you'll feel for a long while, and you'll need time to get over it. I can well understand that. I wouldn't interfere with your sorrow in any way. But is it well to be idle, do you think? I leave it to your own good sense. You're young, and this should be your working time, you know, if you're ever to do any work in the world. And work's a wholesome and a necessary thing, let me tell you. I wouldn't speak to you rudely or harshly, be sure of that, my boy. But wouldn't it be as well for you to pluck up heart and be busy again? Wouldn't that be the best for your own comfort and well-doing, don't you think?"

I felt that he was right, and that I was fairly chargeable with my old offence of "going lopping:

about with my hands in my pockets," to adopt Reube's framing of the indictment.

"I'll go back to London to-morrow, uncle," I said.

"No, no, I wouldn't have you be in such a hurry, neither. I only want you to think over it a bit." He was moving away. Then he appeared to hesitate. With an air of sudden resolution, he said—

"There's something more I had to say. Come into the house for a minute or two."

I followed him into the little parlour, looking on to the pathway leading to the farm-yard. He carefully closed the door after me.

"Do you know how much your education as a lawyer and your living in London has cost altogether?"

"No. I have not calculated."

He told me the amount. It took me by surprise; it was much more than I had thought possible.

"I fear I have seemed very extravagant."

"It's not that. The money's gone, and it's no use fretting over it. The law's an expensive profession, and what with premiums and stamps, the sum is soon made up. I don't charge you

with extravagance. It's a pity, of course, that you didn't know your own mind better. You liked the notion of becoming a lawyer well enough, when it was first proposed to you. Well, you were but a lad at the time. And you were anxious to get away from home, and see something of the world. It was natural, no doubt, though it pressed hard upon us—upon your mother, I should say. I'll not speak of myself. And you didn't care for farming. Well, you had your way. But now it seems you don't care for the law. And you've taken up with another calling."

I said that art would be my profession in the future—that I meant to become a painter.

"Yes, I've understood that. But are you sure you're right this time, Duke? Because you're no longer a boy. There should be an end now of these mistakes—'false starts' as they call them in the racing world. They waste time, and strength, and money. I'm not miserly, as you know; and all I have will be yours one day, most likely, after your poor mother's gone. I'm not thinking of sparing my purse. But it's time that you worked for your own living, and were independent of help from me. A man, and you're a man now, owes that duty to himself."

I answered rather proudly that I was already practically independent, that I secured the means of living by my services in the studio of Sir George Nightingale.

"Yes, I was coming to that," he said. His voice had become hoarse, and he was much agitated, the while he seemed striving to appear calm. I noticed that his fingers were nervously twitching at the lappets of his coat. And now, unconsciously, I think, he had buttoned it up almost to his throat, as though the action was somehow bracing to his resolution.

"There are certain things that have long been kept from you, properly, I think. There was no good telling you of them, while you were not of an age to understand them. But the time has come when you should know them. When, indeed, you must know them. For it seems to me you have a choice to make."

"A choice?"

"Yes. A choice that will greatly affect your future life—and our lives here, too."

"I do not understand."

"You have to choose between your mother and Sir George Nightingale."



“Sir George Nightingale! Again I must say I do not understand.”

“*Sir George Nightingale is your father!* Now do you understand?”

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE DEAD PAST.

My amazement was extreme. The strange revelation came upon me like a blow. For a moment it fairly stunned me. I was speechless, almost senseless, with surprise. My first thought, when I could think at all, was that my uncle had gone mad. When I ventured to look at him—I could not immediately—in my feeling of stupefaction I had covered my eyes with my hands—he had turned away from me, and was leaning upon the window-sill, as though unwilling to witness my great trouble. He was much moved and distressed without doubt; but I could not question his perfect sanity. Next came the reflection, ludicrous in its incongruity just then—but yet not to be resisted—that I had unwittingly served a writ upon my own father! It was an unseemly recollection at such a moment; but my brain was in such a whirl, I was

glad to make sure of any practical rational thought, however little importance it might in truth possess. We remained silent for some minutes.

"Sir George Nightingale is my father?" I demanded at length, in a gasping voice, that sounded strangely even to myself. I could not recognise it as my own. It was as the voice of some one I had never known.

"Yes!"

I had almost looked for his contradicting his former statement—for his assuring me that I had misunderstood him. The thing was still so incredible to me.

"You never suspected this?"

"Never."

"He breathed no word of it? Made no sign?"

"None."

"Yet the opportunity was afforded him. Let him deny that if he dare," said my uncle, with unusual warmth. "You bore from here a letter to him, which told him all. It was not written by my advice. It was written in spite of my advice. But your mother wished it to be: so you took the letter with you to London. You delivered it to him, the contents being unknown to you. It was thought right that you should know nothing of them. The

result showed that we had judged correctly. You gave him the letter informing him that you were his own only son—and he said——nothing!”

“He has been most kind to me,” I said, pleadingly.

“Oh, he can be kind, most kind. Soft speeches and sweet smiles cost him nothing. Did he own you for his child? Did he take you to his heart as his son? Did he avow the wrongs done to the wife who loved him—the wife he abandoned and left to starve, or worse? Did he speak one word of penitence, of remorse; did he hint even at the sins he has committed, at the evil he has wrought! No! and you tell me of his kindness! I tell you that he was a liar and a coward and a villain from the beginning. He remains so still.”

My uncle spoke vehemently, trembling with passion the while, and striking the table noisily with his clenched hand. Anger had lent him words—even eloquence. I had never before known him so greatly excited.

“And now it is for you to choose between your mother—what she has been to you all your life, you know, I need not surely remind you—and this scoundrel, who has been, as you say, so kind to you, that he shrinks from owning you as his son!”

"He is my father, you tell me. Please to recollect that. Do not speak of him in a way his son should not hear."

"What! I may not speak of him! What possesses you? Have you, too, become infatuated about this man? Has he so won you over by his false tongue and his glozing airs that you are blind to his real nature? that you are deaf to the truth about him?"

"He is my father."

"A father who ignores you, a father who scarcely knew of your existence, a father who, for long years and years, has troubled himself in no way concerning you, well content that you should starve, so long as he was not plagued to buy bread for you!"

"He is my father. I am not his judge. Still less is it for me to punish him."

I scarcely knew what I said. Certainly I could not grasp the full significance of my uncle's words, of his charges against Sir George. Yet I felt that it was not to my ears that such severe censure of him should be addressed.

"Oh, you lay stress upon your duty as a son!" said my uncle, bitterly. "Pray, is that due less to your mother than to this man? Are the wrongs

she has sustained at his hands nothing in your eyes?"

"Does she ask me to avenge them?"

"No!" cried a voice behind me. My mother had entered the room.

"Hugh," she said, gently but firmly, as she laid her hand upon his shoulder, "you promised to be calm."

"I hope to be so. I have tried to be so, Mildred," he said, after a pause. With an effort he regained something of his ordinary composure. "I will be more patient in the future. Forgive me, Duke, if I have expressed myself too warmly. I desired only to set before you, plainly as I might, a very painful story. I have been hurried into passion and violence. But that is over now. I'm calm again, as you see. Of your duty as a son it is for you to judge. But the mention of your father's name—the thought of it even—fires my heart strangely. It has done so any time this score of years past. May I never be brought face to face with him! The trial—the temptation would be too great for me. For your mother's wrongs, they are not to be avenged by you or by me. So she has willed it; or, do you think I would have waited all this time and struck no blow on her behalf? I

have yielded to her wishes—her commands in this matter; and she has good warrant for her decision. Vengeance is not for us, though it's hard, very hard, sometimes, to sit down meekly with one's hands before one and do nothing when cruel injury has been inflicted upon us, or upon those dear to us. And then, to find sin prosperous, and the sinner great—honoured—famous; the world bowing down before him! But I'll not revile him more. He is your father, as you say, Duke—and he's Mildred's husband. I'll not forget that, and I'll bridle my tongue. I'll tell what I have to tell—for it must be told now—as simply as may be. Give me your keys, Mildred."

She gave them to him. He opened her desk and took from it a little packet of papers. There fell from these, as he placed them on the table before him, the oval miniature in its washed leathern case I had seen but once before, when I was quite a child. Again I held it in my hands and examined it. I could trace little likeness in it to Sir George.

"He has much changed since this was painted," I observed.

"Changed!" said my mother, faintly. "No wonder. Yet it was done by his own hand, years since, before our marriage. It was like him once.

At least I thought so. But he did not do himself justice. He was very handsome then. He is handsome still, no doubt, however changed. And he is not the only one who has changed." She spoke with half-closed eyes, pressing her hand upon her forehead.

My thoughts went back to the old time, when I had first found the miniature in my mother's desk, after seeing the large portrait of Lord Overbury at the Hall. Had the fact that both pictures were the work of the same hand, and betrayed something of the same method of art, blended and confused them in my mind, even in its then unskilled and immature condition?

I remembered that I had then blamed myself, for viewing my father's portrait with a certain apathy I found almost unaccountable. It was different now. He lived; I had seen him, and knew him.

"You told me he was dead, mother," I said gently to her.

"Was he not dead then to both of us? Is he not dead, still, to me, at least?" She took my hand in hers and held it while my uncle told the story of the past.

I cannot repeat it precisely in his words — I was



still too much confused and disturbed to gather much more than the purport of his discourse. While I remember well his attitude and manner as he spoke—the dignity with which he had suddenly become invested, and the unaccustomed fluency of his speech—yet his exact phrases have escaped me. Moreover it will be convenient to engraft upon his story certain particulars which it did not embrace, and which came to my knowledge at a later date.

The packet contained only the certificate of my mother's marriage, and a few faded-looking letters.

Concisely stated, my uncle's story was to this effect:—

Hugh and Mildred Orme were the only children of old David Orme, of the Down Farm. Mildred had been christened after her aunt, her father's sister, an elderly maiden lady living at Bath in fair circumstances, but whose property at her decease devolved upon David Orme. While on a visit to Miss Orme at Bath, Mildred, a girl of seventeen or so—high-spirited, and of remarkable beauty, had been sent to school to receive instruction in music and drawing, and other accomplishments. Miss Orme had desired that her niece should receive a rather more refined education than was usual with farmers' daughters at that period. David Orme had

opposed this step ; but he had been overruled by his sister, who claimed a right to promote the education of her niece and god-daughter. At the school Mildred attended, she first met George Nightingale. He was there in the character of assistant to his father, the drawing-master of the establishment. Frequently the old man's failing health kept him from the school ; at such times George would give the lessons in his father's stead.

Between the young drawing-master and his beautiful pupil an attachment sprung up. At least, he did not hesitate to avow his love for her, and he became possessed of her affections. It was said of him—for he was notoriously poor, and involved in debt—that he was tempted by a report that she was an heiress. She was known to be the daughter of a rich farmer, and it was believed that she would inherit the property of her aunt. That old Miss Orme's income would terminate with her life was not then generally understood. Still Mildred's prospects were of too modest a kind to be especially alluring to a fortune-hunter or a necessitous man. More probably he loved her truthfully for her beauty, and for herself. He formally proposed for her hand. David Orme would not hear of his suit, and ordered the discontinuance of Mildred's draw-

ing-lessons. He addressed his sister on the subject in very peremptory terms, threatening to come to Bath to carry away his daughter. To the young man he wrote, it was admitted, most insultingly.

Then came a great scandal. Mildred escaped from her aunt's house, eloped with George Nightingale, and became his wife.

David Orme was furious. He never forgave his daughter. He commanded that she should not be mentioned again in his presence. He declared that his doors should be for ever closed against her. He struck her name out of the Family Bible, and made a new will, bequeathing all his property to his son Hugh. He died very soon afterwards, attributing his shortened life, and the sorrows of his closing days, to the ingratitude and misconduct of his daughter.

At this time Miss Orme was already dead. She had supplied such assistance as she could to the young couple. They were now left penniless—dependent only upon the exertions of young George Nightingale. These should have sufficed. His talents had been recognised; he had received much patronage and encouragement. It was even said that he had been spoiled by the overpraise of Bath society.

But the marriage had not been a happy one. He was heard to avow that it had ruined him. It had entailed upon him cold looks and scandalous whisperings, and the loss of many friends. He had been so fêted as a bachelor. As a married man he was disregarded. He grew impatient, discontented, angry with himself, and with all about him. He repented his marriage. His creditors were threatening him.

Against his wife he could fairly bring no charge. Had she not suffered by her marriage not less than he had? But already his heart was cooling towards her. Poverty had stepped between them. It had not changed her love one whit—had intensified it rather—but it was destroying his. And then he was ambitious, self-seeking. His home had become miserable—unendurable to him. His indignation at what he held to be his unmerited misfortune, rankled and festered within him.

Still some friends remained to him—among them Lord Overbury and Lord and Lady Wycherley. When his child was born, Lord Overbury was sponsor to the infant, lending him his name of Marmaduke. His lordship was not very favourably regarded by the more refined society of Bath. A nobleman of sporting tastes, rude manners, reck-

less, extravagant, and it was said of somewhat vicious life. Still there was no very distinct accusation against him in those days ; and he had certainly encouraged the young painter, rewarding him handsomely for his labours.

Lady Wycherley, too, had been kind to Mrs. Nightingale at a time when she much needed and greatly prized kindness. Her ladyship was a beauty then, with a husband much older than herself. She was light-hearted and somewhat light-headed ; but her name was at this time free from the serious reproach her folly and sin brought upon it afterwards. My mother always spoke gently of the erring woman.

George Nightingale quitted Bath alone, suddenly, and secretly, to avoid arrest, it was said, and to seek fame and fortune in London. He had been furnished by Lord Overbury with a sufficient sum of money and with letters of introduction. His wife and child were to rejoin him at a future date, when he had been able to prepare for them something of a home in town. He left fifty pounds with his wife for her support meanwhile. After a week or so he sent to her for twenty pounds of this fifty. She never heard from him again. She wrote to him repeatedly, but obtained no answer

to her letters. She had never seen him since. His parting words had been most affectionate. His one letter from London was hurriedly written, but betrayed no lack of tenderness. Had he designed to abandon her for ever?

"He left her to the tender mercy of his friend, Lord Overbury," said my uncle, sternly. "There was a corrupt and infamous compact between them!"

His lordship had frequently seen Mildred Orme before her marriage. She was a daughter of one of the tenants upon the Overbury lands.

In Bath he had been the constant companion of her husband, his chief patron and friend. Something shocked by his uncouth bearing and speech, she had yet faith in his disinterestedness. With all his roughness, it seemed probable that he was really kind-hearted, generous, and honest. She was soon undeceived.

He persecuted her with the most shameful addresses.

She was almost friendless—her money was well nigh exhausted. Her alarm was extreme; but her courage did not desert her. Despair perhaps lent her strength. In an angry scene she braved and defied the villain, dismissing him from

her presence. Then she fainted away, pressing to her heart her child, as though it had been a shield.

In proof of this dreadful passage in his narrative my uncle produced a letter addressed to her by Lord Overbury. It avowed his passion for her, his fixed determination to possess her. It pointed out that starvation was threatening both her and her child, and that her only hope of life and safety lay in her yielding to his suit. Moreover, it conveyed in the plainest terms that her husband had deserted her, wilfully, and with premeditation, conniving at his own shame and at her undoing. It was a brutal letter; horrible in its frankness.

With help from Lady Wycherley, carrying her child in her arms, Mrs. Nightingale fled from Bath, and took refuge with her brother, Hugh Orme. She had never since quitted the Down Farm. When her father had discarded her, scarcely less angry and indignant than he was, she had vowed never to set foot in the old house again. Time had cancelled that rash pledge. David Orme was dead; her need and her trouble was most urgent; and Hugh would take no denial.

"I knew nothing of what was happening in Bath," he said, "or I should have been at her side to help her, long before. Be sure of that, Duke."

"I was proud, and I was punished," murmured my mother. "I wanted none to know of the misery that had followed upon my marriage. I wanted to endure alone. That could not be. I thank God for it now."

Poor Lady Wycherley suffered for her kindness to my mother. She drew upon herself the love of Lord Overbury.

What were the drugs, the charms, the conjuration, the mighty magic of this man? He had the repute of a successful lover—hideous, brutal as he was. But he possessed a certain force of character—an animal violence of disposition. He hurled himself against obstacles, and trampled them down. Thus, in many cases, he succeeded in attaining his ends.

Lady Wycherley fled with him, and subsequently, as the reader knows, became his wife. She wrote to inform my mother of her marriage—a strange, penitent, incoherent letter. Afterwards at intervals she wrote again—when she was separated from her husband—neither asking nor obtaining replies to her letters. It was as though she clung to the woman who had displayed a fortitude superior to her own.

In this wise only can I explain the distrust my



mother had exhibited, when informed by Rosetta of her marriage with Lord Overbury. My mother was unconvinced that the real Lady Overbury did not still survive.

It was at this troubled period of my mother's life, as I gathered, that my uncle had first sought legal help from the late Mr. Monck. But whatever his advice had been, no action followed thereon. In this way, however, something of these early events had, no doubt, become known to Mr. Monck's clerk—Vickery.

## CHAPTER XV.

### A BITTER STORY.

THAT my uncle's revelations had been most painful to us all I need not say. Dead silence followed his narrative. For my part I could not speak. Somehow it seemed that I was constituted the judge of my father; the impeachment of him was plainly addressed to me; sentence against him was looked for at my hands. I could not utter it. I could not even frame it in my own mind. My consternation was too great. I still clung desperately to unreasonable doubts. With something of a convulsive effort I closed my mind against conviction.

My mother still held me by the hand, as though she dreaded my being torn from her, or my being moved to forgetfulness of her. And now and then she directed timorous glances at my face, seeking to read there my thoughts, with a kind of fear lest I should judge her harshly or misinterpret her con-

duct. At times I noted she trembled violently, and the dew of exceeding suffering glistened upon her forehead. This story of the past wounded her like a knife. Yet, as I learnt afterwards, she had insisted upon being beside me the while it was told to me, although my uncle had almost forgotten this, it seemed, having been prematurely hurried into his recital. He had been waiting an opportunity for entering upon it, and one had occurred almost before he was aware.

“It was thought well, Duke,” he said, “to withhold from you knowledge of these facts until you were of an age to understand them fully. For my part I wish they could have remained hidden from you altogether. That might have been, perhaps, but for what has recently occurred. Your going to London almost involved introduction to your father. So your mother judged at least. She thought it due to him that he should at any rate know of your existence. Well, without acknowledging you, he has been kind to you, you say. He has offered you employment, and a home in his house. His motive in doing this? Does he or not seek to detach you from your mother? I tell you plainly that I have no faith in him. That I think of him now exactly as I thought of him twenty years ago. I will have

no dealings with him. I will not change words with him. I will not look upon his face this side of the grave, if I can avoid it. But I will not again wound you by expressing in plain terms my opinion of him. Only be sure of this: he is now what he was then. His conduct shows it. Or why did he hesitate to call you his son? Well, it is for you to decide what you will do. Mind I hold out no threat. I know what you have been both to your mother and to me. You are very dear to us, dearer than I care to say, than I can find words to say, for my heart cannot make its way into speech—least of all in such a case as this. I'll not speak, therefore, of closing the farm-house doors against you. Something of that I may, at one time, have had in my thoughts; but it's gone from me now. Only, don't close the doors yourself. Don't part from us without well knowing why. If you are to choose this man's side, to cleave to him rather than to your mother—and no doubt he can help you on to fortune—luck has favoured him and he's prosperous and can make others so—be sure of what he really is, and learn from his treatment of others how he may treat you some day. There, I'll say no more. I'll leave it to you, Duke, and, God willing, I'll not repine or quarrel with you, let you decide what you

may." So he ended abruptly, collecting the papers before him into a little pile, his hands trembling nervously as he did so.

I could not speak for some moments. My heart beat with a painful rapidity and violence.

"I must see Sir George," I said at length.

"Must see him again? Why?"

"He has been accused—justly, perhaps. But, at least, he is entitled to be heard in his own defence. That must be if I am to be his judge, as God knows, I never wished to be. I must see him and tell him of these charges against him."

"He will deny them. He will persuade you of their injustice."

"I cannot condemn him unheard."

My mother pressed my hand tenderly. In her judgment I had decided rightly.

"Be it so," said my uncle gloomily. "Only be careful, Duke. You are no match for him."

"Let me take these papers and confront him with them. Trust me."

"Can you trust yourself?"

"I promised to see him again. It was my last word when I parted from him in London."

"Be it so then," he repeated. "You must keep your word. Take the papers. Think of your

mother, and of what she has suffered. So you may be armed against him."

"And if he confesses his sin," I said with hesitation; "if he is indeed penitent—is there to be no forgiveness for him, nor hope of forgiveness?"

"Let him come back to the wife he has abandoned—let him avow his penitence on his knees before the woman he has wronged—it will be time enough then to talk of forgiveness. Again I tell you, think of your mother and her sufferings. She should hold the first place in your heart, and not this man, your father, who shrinks from owning you. Remember that."

With a stern face and a certain solemn movement of his hand that added impressiveness to his speech, he strode from the room. My mother threw her arms round me and kissed me tenderly.

"You will remember, also, that you are speaking to your father, Duke."

She whispered this cautiously, as though fearing lest she should be overheard by my uncle. It was plain that he, usually so submissive to her slightest wishes, had asserted his authority in this matter, overruling her in some measure, fearing, perhaps, feminine yielding and failure of decision on her part. Could it be that she loved her husband still?

It was certain that no word of blame or charge against him had fallen from her lips. And now her eyes were dim with tears.

“God bless you, Duke. And come back to me soon—you will, I know you will—but do not harden your heart against him.”

Early the next morning I quitted the farm for London. I bade adieu to Rachel in a few rather formal phrases. She was surprised, I think, at the abruptness of my departure. But I could not explain to her its object and motive.

I was greatly depressed. The story of the past weighed very heavily upon my heart, wounding and bruising it sorely. The future seemed dark and threatening to me. I was entering upon a most painful and difficult task. I was beset with doubts as to how I should accomplish it. I tortured myself with fanciful pictures of my forthcoming interview with Sir George: revolving, mentally, over and again, the possibilities of the case; rehearsing the words I intended to utter, and framing the answers it was probable that he would make to me. It was a most miserable and futile occupation. Such things never happen as we plan them; but usually take quite different and unexpected turns and forms. I felt acutely the burthen of responsibility

that had fallen upon me. I seemed to be growing old with undue rapidity: the events of the last few weeks had so saddened me as to sap away something of my life.

I dreaded lest I should be blameably weak—lest I should be foolishly severe. I mistrusted my own strength of mind and powers of judgment. I knew that I was still capable of much “boyishness” of conduct. I liked Sir George, the while I could not pretend to feel towards him the affection a son ordinarily feels for a father. But he had been kind to me, and I was grateful. I admired him. I recognised the singular charm of his manner. Its influence I had been unable to resist. There was danger of his cajoling me out of my sense of right. I was bound to hear such explanation, if any, as he might choose to offer. A graceful attitude, a soft smile, a tender pressure of the hand, a few easily-turned sentences, admirably delivered, and I might be subject to him again, enthralled by him completely. I was weak enough even for that; or feared that I was.

On the other hand, I was fully sensible of the deep wrongs my mother had received at his hands. She had been treated most cruelly, most infamously. My heart burned and throbbed violently



as I thought of all she had undergone. No censure, no punishment seemed too severe for the man who had brought upon her this long and wholly unmerited suffering. I was bound, at least, to shrink from him with repugnance. But, then, he must have an opportunity of explaining his conduct. Could he explain it? Could he prove anything in his defence? And would he, if he could?

My love for Rachel was for the while driven from my heart. There seemed no room in it just then for tender sentiments. They were expelled by the angry and conflicting thoughts and purposes that possessed it. The statement conveys as complete a description as I can furnish of my mental condition at this time.

I found Sir George in his studio.

He was busy before his easel, working with almost a feverish alacrity and appetite, as it seemed to me. His eyes were very bright, and there was a flush upon his cheeks.

"Ah, Duke," he said cheerily. "So you're back again. I'm very pleased to see you." And he advanced to meet me.

"What has happened?" He stopped suddenly, gazing at me curiously. "Something, I can see.

And something serious, too. You wear crape. Ah! I remember. You have lost your poor young friend. You wrote to tell me of it; but I was too busy—I mean I hadn't the heart—to answer you. But I feel for you, I do assure you, Duke." He paused for a moment. "No," he resumed, "it's more than that. How white you look! Are you ill? What has happened, I ask you? Why do you stand there silent?"

I could not answer him. The words I had planned to say had gone from my mind. I only knew that I felt faint, and weary, and strangely confused. I was trembling in every limb.

"I see," he said, in an altered tone. "You have had news, bad news—of me—is it not so? We are to meet on different terms henceforth. Your friends in the country have been talking of me. Well? and what did they tell you?"

"All, Sir George."

His face paled, suddenly. He frowned and bit his lips. His expression varied quickly. It was now angry—now sorrowful—now almost contemptuous.

"And they did not spare me! Why should they? It was a bitter story, no doubt."

"A very bitter story, Sir George."

"Well—they told you—?"

"That I was your son, Sir George."

He bowed his head, studying the floor with shrinking half-closed eyes.

"Can't you call me father, Duke?" he asked in a subdued, plaintive tone.

"The word is so new to me," I said simply. He flung from him passionately the paint-brush he had been holding in his hand. He turned away from me and leant against the mantel-piece. It was exactly in that attitude I had seen him on my first introduction to the studio.

"No, you cannot call me father," he said, hoarsely. "I have no right to expect that. It cannot be. And yet, I had hoped, Duke, that you might be able to care for me, if but a little. I thought I might win something of your—regard, I'll say—as a friend; your love, as a son, I knew I could not claim."

"Indeed, Sir George——"

"Hush, Duke. Be careful not to say with one breath what you needs must unsay with the next. And don't, don't for God's sake tell me that I have been kind to you. The reproach would be too cruel." His voice failed him. It was some moments before he spoke again.

"You had no suspicion of all this before?"

"Indeed I never dreamt of such a thing. Even now it seems scarcely credible to me."

"It is true. I am your father. Better, perhaps, if you had never known it. But no, it is part of my punishment that you should know it. Your mother, Duke," he asked presently, "you left her well?"

"She has been suffering. The story that had to be told——"

"True. It must have pained her deeply." He was silent again.

"We are to part then, Duke, I suppose. You are forbidden to be with me. You are to discard me now, in that I for so long a time ignored you. Isn't that so?"

"When I left London, I promised to return to you, Sir George."

"I remember. I thought that something like this might happen. I was sure of it. And I wanted, at least, to see you again. We are to be strangers henceforth?"

I could not reply. He went on in a musing, despondent, submissive tone.

"You are bound to fulfil your mother's wishes; she has never forfeited her claims upon your duty. She must be obeyed, at whatever cost to me."

"Will it cost you anything, Sir George?" I asked, with some anger.

"I may not speak of myself," he answered. "I am bound to bear the consequences of my own acts. I have borne them hitherto, though how severely they have tried me I may not tell—you will not, perhaps, believe. I must bear them still. God knows how!"

"Oh, Sir George!" I cried to him, "can you urge nothing of excuse, of explanation? Will you not even avow sorrow, penitence, for what you have done?"

"What would it avail? Who would credit me? I have sinned past forgiveness, beyond the reach of pity. Can you think that I have not suffered, that I do not suffer now, that I shall not always suffer? But the past is past. What has been done cannot be undone. You ask—you expect of me—what? Words? They are vain. Deeds? I can do nothing; but bear my punishment—not shrinking from it; courting it, rather—as bravely as I may. And I have a duty to fulfil—to the world—to my position—to the fame I have achieved. I have cast off and sacrificed wantonly, cruelly, wickedly, it may be, other ties, but not that one. I have maintained it, and I will maintain it. But do you fancy I

escape unscathed? Do you come here to take vengeance for my sins against your mother?"

"No, indeed not." But with an abrupt movement of his hand he waved away my interposition. He had lost his usual command over himself. He was speaking with strange violence and passion.

"She has been avenged most amply—she is avenged incessantly. You cannot look into my heart. You do not know what my life has been. You cannot think how keen and killing is perpetual self-reproach; how heavily weighs the sense of unending shame; how much it costs to live a lie! And was it nothing, can you believe, to forego calling you my son? The word has been on my lips a thousand times. Was it nothing to know that you would never call me father, or love and honour me as a child should, but must rather shun and shrink from me always? You are dear to me, Duke, most dear. How tenderly I love you, God knows—you never can!"

He stopped, exhausted or overcome by his emotion, and sank into a chair.

"I talk wildly and vainly. We must part, it seems. Be it so. You came with that object, and none other."

“You will not then even ask to be forgiven?”

“Forgiveness? It may not be in such a case as mine. I have sinned too deeply. What,” he asked, suddenly, “did you come to offer me terms of forgiveness?”

I bore in mind my uncle’s words—

“Return to the wife you have abandoned—on your knees before her avow your penitence, and then it will be time to talk of forgiveness.”

He paused for some time.

“It may not be, Duke,” he said at length, rather coldly, and he leant back in his chair.

I was leaving him. But an appealing movement of his hand retained me.

## CHAPTER XVI.

“RING FOR PROPERT!”

“DON’T leave me yet, Duke. There is something I would say to you, if I could only find the right words ; but my mind’s confused just now, my brain is all disordered. I’m faint and giddy. I’ve not been well of late, and the remedies I have sought relieve me but for a little while, and bring upon me worse suffering afterwards. And now this has come upon me. Have patience with me.”

A sudden feebleness had afflicted him. His voice had lost all firmness and tone. The light had gone from his eyes ; they were dim and colourless. He reclined infirmly in his chair, his thin white hands hanging down helplessly. There was something alarming in his look of decrepitude and exhaustion.

“I have but little in the way of explanation to submit to you, Duke. Only, before you judge a



man, you should know something of the trials and temptations he has undergone; you should live his life, if that might be; at least, you should try and understand his heart—its troubles and secrets and sore perplexities. You should trace his sins to their source, for then you may light upon their excuse.

"I was a spoiled child, prematurely forced into notice, over-indulged, ruinously fondled and flattered. I loved and I married—grievous errors both; for I was poor, in debt, and extravagant. Something of this you have, no doubt, heard before; but not all. Under circumstances of extreme pressure I left my wife and her child, yourself, to try and establish myself in London.

"I am charged, of course, with abandoning her. But, when I quitted her, believe me, Duke, I had no such thought. Against your mother, my wife, I desire to say no word. I married her because I loved her. She is the only woman I have ever loved. But we were ill-suited to each other. That's the plain truth. Our marriage resulted in misery to both. Under happier conditions this might have been otherwise. But the world seemed to be in a conspiracy against me. It was too strong for me.

I ought not to have married. I had not sufficient faith, or patience, or fortitude.

"I left my wife, as I said, and came to London, alone, to fight my way to success. I had introductions; they availed nothing. I cannot tell you how arduous were my struggles to win fortune and fame; to obtain, in the first instance, the merest subsistence. For months I was on the brink of starvation. I was destitute. I had pawned all my clothes. My sufferings were almost more than I could bear.

"I received letters from my wife—not all she wrote—for I had not money even to pay the demand for postage. How could I answer her? Could I tell her of my wretchedness? I could not.

"Fortune turned towards me at last, but very slowly, and dealing out her favours with a very niggard hand. Still I was gradually rising. I obtained a prize from the Society of Arts. I sold the medal to buy bread.

"I emerged triumphant from the conflict; but with my heart dead within me; my whole nature seared and embittered by the suffering I had undergone. I loved no more. And I learnt from enquiries I made upon the subject that my wife had sought and found a home among her own kindred. They had previously treated her with cruel neglect.

She did not write to me again, and I remained silent.

"I had concealed the fact of my marriage. It was known to no one in London. It seemed to me too flagrant a proof of my folly and imprudence, a fatal hindrance to all professional advancement. It had ruined me in Bath; I was determined it should not also ruin me in London. I had learnt to think that fortune has no kindness in store for those who have given her hostages in the shape of wife and children. And I kept silence so long that speech upon the subject at last became impossible to me. I could not speak for very shame.

"Do not think that good intentions, rightful impulses, never stirred within me. I had a sense of justice left me yet. But the impediments in the way of honesty seemed insurmountable; and time and absence became impediments in their turn. It was easier to advance and to be silent. The future had prosperity in store for me. But as I became famous, so the difficulty increased of revealing a past that was in the present shameful to me. And, as I have said, I no longer loved.

"And then bear in mind that my circumstances have been always less prosperous than they have seemed to be. I have been called rich; I am not

rich. It is true that I have earned large sums ; but my expenses have been very great. I have always been extravagant. Money slips through my fingers almost before I can close them upon it. For long years I was harassed and drained by my early debts and difficulties. I have never been able to save. I have had a position to maintain. Expensive journeys have been forced upon me. And I repeat I have been extravagant throughout my life—a prodigal and a spendthrift.

“That is my story, Duke. You are the only living creature to whom I would tell it. And you can well believe that it is no light trial to me to relate it even to you. To the world I owe no explanations ; I will give none. It has shown me no kindness ; it has no real claim upon my gratitude. I have forced from it its rewards ; they were not freely given. The world was well content that I should perish unknown, unaided. That my fate has been different, has been of my own ordering, the result of painful toil and bitter anguish. But I would have, Duke, if it might be—your good opinion—no, not that—I dare not ask that—but something of your pity. I would beg that of you—and of you only.”

His voice had sunk almost to a whisper. He

had been speaking with his face turned from me—pausing now and then for breath; he was in deep pain, apparently—physical, as well as mental.

"Yet I would not have even your pity, upon false pretences, Duke," he resumed in a firmer time. "Of penitence I can make no profession. I know the weakness of my own nature. What I did, it may be, under like temptations, I should do again. Pity me, if you will, because I have sinned and suffered, not because I am penitent. I concealed my marriage from a feeling of false, unworthy pride. But that pride clings to me still. My sacrifices to it in the past I might repeat—I cannot be sure—were the chance again offered me, and my life given me back to live over again. And to that pride, false, unworthy, as I own it to be, I owe something. It brought me fame and success; it sustained me while I fought my way to the front. It shall sustain me still, though it may be as a poison that gives strength for a while, only to bring death at last. I have discarded it but for a moment, for your sake, Duke; my story told I resume it again. And as I have lived, I will live on to the end. What may be said of me, when I am gone hence, will not trouble me."

Again he paused.

"Will you not speak to me, Duke? I say again, my wife, your mother, is wholly blameless. I make no charge against her. She was too good for me; I was unworthy of her. She deserved a far happier fate than that entailed upon her by our most ill-starred union. I would that we had never met. For what she has endured my pain and sorrow are genuine indeed. And then she is your mother, Duke. She gave you life, and has loved and cherished you always—she has made you what you are—fulfilling the duty to you I have so scandalously evaded. I can regard her only with the tenderest reverence."

He ceased speaking, and with an effort he turned in his chair, and fixed his glazed lustreless eyes upon me, looking for my reply. Upon one point, in the story of the past, which the most severely charged his conduct and character, he had not touched.

"You left your wife to starve," I said bluntly—but without design to be unfeeling. I but used the first words that came to me—thankful that any came. He did not rebuke me by any display of impatience. He answered with a sort of despondent humility.

"What could I do? I was starving myself."

"You don't know—you have never asked—what she endured."

"Poor woman! I can judge by my own sufferings."

"She was left with her child—helpless, forlorn, destitute."

"Still she had friends who came to her assistance. I was quite friendless."

"But before that—to what was she exposed?"

"Do not ask me. I cannot answer. I dare not even think. God knows I would have helped her if I could. But I was powerless. As I have told you, I was myself destitute—desperate—I was for days without food."

I thrust Lord Overbury's letter into his hands.

"She was exposed to this. Do you know it now for the first time?"

He screamed as he read it, and clutching me convulsively by the arm, dragged himself up. He was trembling violently; the letter fluttered in his hands. He gasped for breath. He tried to speak—but could not for some moments.

"His writing! The villain! He dared do this? I see now—I understand," he said at length, in a strange strained voice. "Duke! as I am a gentleman—but that's idle!—as I am a man, I swear to you that I knew nothing of this. I never dreamt that such a thing could be. God help me:

I am punished now, indeed! I never felt my punishment until now. I see what you have thought of me, what you must think of me. And she, my wife, believed what this villain wrote, believed that it was with my sanction—my connivance—I cannot speak the words! As I live, Duke, its false, false, false!” His voice failed him; he could no longer articulate distinctly.

It was a most distressing scene. I could say nothing, do nothing, but afford him some support as he leant heavily upon me.

“The villain, the lying brutal villain! And he called himself my friend; he had been my patron! I had received help, money from him—a price for my infamy, so it must have seemed! She believed it; she could not but believe it. But she baffled him, defied, escaped him? I’ll not ask that. I know she did. She was always pure as snow, and brave as pure, and Heaven heard her when she cried for help. Yet that I, her husband, should have left her at that devil’s mercy! I, her lawful protector, who had sworn to love and cherish her! I was far away. I knew nothing of her cruel trial. I did not know it, and yet I should have known it, for I knew him, and what he was capable of. Duke, my poor boy, I’m going mad, I think. Let



me hear you speak, say something, anything, but that you believe me guilty of this hideous crime!"

I could not believe it.

"Father!" I cried to him.

"Thank God that you have said that word! My boy! My boy!" He hid his face upon my shoulder.

He seemed quite wrecked and broken. I was terrified at the change in him. Was this the Sir George Nightingale, I asked myself—the question rushed across my mind, even at that moment of wild excitement—that I had seen no long time since? The calm, polished man of fashion, so stately and elegant, with the studied speech, the cold set smile, the composed manners, the dignified presence? All were gone. He was as another creature. Was he systematically acting a part? was he himself, then or now? But no, I could not doubt the truth of his emotion; the agony of his suffering was not to be denied. It was only my own bewilderment that brought questioning of his good faith. I was so distressed and disturbed I could not fairly grasp the facts about me. All seemed blurred and involved, real and yet unreal too, substance and shadow for ever shifting places, dreadful under both aspects.

He roused himself a little presently, and turned towards me a worn, gaunt, pallid face, wet with tears. He gripped my hands with spasmodic fierceness, as though to make sure of my presence, while he fixed upon me his hollow, vacant-looking eyes. He spoke faintly, indistinctly; I had a difficulty in comprehending all he said. There was something of delirium in his manner.

“You’ll not leave me, Duke; at least, not yet. You’ll not quit the house. I only ask that. I’ll not trouble you; you need not see me. Only let me know that you are still near me; let me hear you, now and then, moving to and fro overhead. I won’t ask more than that. My boy! You said ‘father!’ didn’t you? I was not dreaming? God bless you, Duke! I shall paint no more; at least, I think not. I can’t. The power’s gone from me. But there’s that sketch of you I began a little while since; I shall never finish it. But your mother might like to have it. She’d not take it from me. No, no; she couldn’t, you know. I don’t think that for a moment. But from you, she would. You are the only link between us. God help me! I’m dying, I think. But, no; I’ll not die yet. I’ve work to do. That villain! I’ll find him; let him hide where he will. I’ve not seen him this many a long

year ; but he shall not escape me. How weak and faint I am ! Ring the bell, Duke, for Propert. I'm ill. Propert knows what to do. I can stand for a moment without help, Duke ; at least, I think so."

He could not, however. As I left him, to ring the bell, he tottered and fell heavily on the floor. I sprang to assist him. Propert entered.

"There's no occasion to be frightened, sir," said Propert, quietly. "Sir George has fainted, sir ; that's all. I've seen him like this before—almost like this. The medicine he takes, sir—that's a good deal to do with it, I think. He'll sleep now, and wake refreshed. You don't look very well yourself, sir. You're not used to this sort of thing ; and it's upset you a bit. No wonder. Better get a breath of fresh air, sir. This room's very close ; with the smell of paint and one thing and another. You can safely leave Sir George to me. I know what to do."

## CHAPTER XVII.

### REACTION.

I LEFT the room. I found Mole on the landing outside.

“What has happened?” he asked. I told him that Sir George was ill—that he had fainted. I added that Probert was with him.

“But you yourself, Duke? Have you seen a ghost? You’re as white as a sheet; you’re all of a tremble: your teeth are chattering. No, don’t answer. Come down-stairs. Lean on me.”

I was in a sadly confused state, with a feeling of sickness and giddiness oppressing me. I could see nothing distinctly. There was a painful singing in my ears. I only knew that Mole was supporting me in the kindest way, full of solicitude on my account.

A little crowd appeared to have gathered round me. All were talking at once, and all at random,

in the most bewildering way. So it seemed to me.

"Give the lad air," I heard Mole say. "Let's have room to breathe;" and he opened one of the windows. I was reclining in an easy chair in the dining-room. It had changed its aspects somehow. All the pictures I remembered to have seen there—the black, highly-varnished old masters in their massive frames—had vanished.

There was a kneeling figure beside me—proffering smelling-salts—a woman—Rosetta! Could it be? Yes: certainly, Rosetta!

How did she happen to be there? She had called to sit to Sir George, possibly. But her presence did not surprise me. Nothing surprised me. I was as one dreaming.

There was talk of sending for a doctor—for me, or for Sir George. I knew not which.

"But you're better, now. You're beginning to look more like yourself," someone said; Mole, I think.

"My poor Duke!" Rosetta was smoothing my hair from my forehead, was bathing my temples with eau de cologne.

"You were scared at seeing him faint."

"It wasn't that only," I said.

"It's nothing. He'll be well again, presently ;" Mole was speaking. "Sir George ——"

I stopped him. "Take care what you say. He's my father." I saw that he interchanged significant glances with Rosetta.

"And you didn't know it? Never guessed it? The news came upon you suddenly? Ah! I see!"

"My Duke! I read it in his eyes long since—whenever he spoke of you—I was sure of it. And then there was a trembling in his voice—though he tried to hide it. But I knew it must be so. And your mother—his wife? Of course, of course. Pardon me, my Duke. But why—no, no, that's your secret. I've no right to ask."

She pressed my hand tenderly; there were tears in her eyes. Mole stood silently surveying me, rubbing his chin meditatively.

"I always said Sir George was a strange man," he muttered, after a long pause. "I perceived a likeness from the first: 'a trick of Cœur de Lion's face,' I said. You remember? The line is in King John; act the first, scene the first."

They were very kind to me. Soon I recovered somewhat, and could stand unassisted, though I still felt weak and tremulous, and greatly depressed. Rosetta went her way, having first made inquiries

concerning Sir George. He was going on well, Propert reported. He was sleeping quietly on the sofa in his studio.

A strange, shabby-looking old man had been passing to and fro—haunting us—now sitting on a hall chair, now peering into the dining-room. He wore list slippers, and was very silent in his movements. There was an air of mystery about him.

“Who is that?” I enquired of Mole. He hesitated, and looked at me curiously.

“He’s a model. He sits to artists. That’s his profession.” From his manner I knew that he was deceiving me. I said as much.

“Well, that’s what I’m told he is. That’s what I tell other people he is,” Mole answered. “Can you bear to hear the truth? Haven’t you had enough of bad news—no, I don’t mean that, either. But some scandal against Sir George—your father—is involved; that is, it would be scandal if it wasn’t true. I mean—indeed I scarcely know what I do mean.”

“This man—who is he? Why is he here? What does he want?”

“If you insist, I’ll tell you.”

It seemed to me, that he was really anxious to tell me.

"That man is what's called, 'a man in possession.' The fact is, there's an execution in the house. Don't start. We're getting accustomed to things of that kind. There was one in last week while you were away. We got rid of it, and the pictures that used to hang here, at the same time. Now comes another. That's the plain truth—the still plainer truth being—shall I go on? I will. Sir George is ruined."

"Ruined?"

"That's the word. It's been coming a long while. It's come at last. You remember our noticing, some time ago, that his hand shook very much? If that had been all! It wasn't. His elbow has been shaking too."

I did not understand him. He gave a pitying shrug.

"I must speak by the card. And yet there are so many flourishes of speech handy that would drape a little the ugly nakedness of the fact! Hush! Sir George is a gambler. The money that comes by canvas goes by green baize."

He appeared much gratified by this fanciful method of stating the case.

"You understand? Hazard—roulette—the dice box. That's the secret of his ruin, and of



a good many others' besides. It should not be, of course ; but it is, and has been for some time past. Don't be angry. You *would* have the truth, you know. He's ruined. It's odd, but somehow I like him the better for it. He's so much nearer to me now than when he was rich. After all, what's wealth but a bubble? A bubble that hasn't blown much my way, however. I'm not a fair judge of it, perhaps. Mind ; I don't say he won't recover himself. He may. Easily. He's only got to work ; if he'll but turn on the tap, money will soon flow forth again. But—as I happen to know—he's heavily in debt, and he *will* go on playing! Have you never wondered at his strange absence—at the late hours he keeps? Of course you have? Well, now you've got a key to the mystery. And then the opium! A strange man, as I have always said. But I have pained you : I see. You're quite upset. You're little used to troubles of this sort. I am, and I can bear them. Especially other people's troubles. It's astonishing how lightly they weigh upon one. But I'm talking idly. I feel for you, and am sorry for you, my boy, believe me when I say so. And go up-stairs and lie down for awhile. That will be the best thing for you. And try and sleep.

I'll come up presently, and see how you are. Don't be down-hearted, there's a good lad. Life's like the Devil—never so black as it's painted, or so insupportable as it seems to be. And if I might recommend such a thing, a stiff tumbler of brandy and water—very hot. You'll find it afford very considerable relief under almost any circumstances of difficulty. It would even, I do believe, minister comfort to a mind diseased. It's the real sweet oblivious antidote Macbeth asked for and couldn't get. He flourished at a remote and uncivilised period, you know."

I was wretchedly unnerved and ill; and for some days I was almost confined to my room. I slept badly; I suffered from violent headache and feverish restlessness. I was greatly perplexed as to the course of conduct I should adopt in the future. At present it was clear to me, however, that I could not quit Sir George's house. I had not strength of mind or of body to take so resolute a step. I was oppressed with doubts as to my duty in the matter, the while I bitterly reproached myself for my own infirmity of judgment. I was miserable at the thought of decision being required of me. Should I write to my mother or to my uncle for counsel? I could not. My hand refused

to hold a pen ; my thoughts shrunk back from being set down on paper—became inarticulate and vague and halting at every attempt. I felt that I was unable to do justice to Sir George's explanations—to render them intelligible or to obtain for them the consideration that was their due. I might be peremptorily bidden to part from him forthwith. *That* I could not do. Not because I felt for him the love of a son for a father—according to my ideal conception of such a love—but because I pitied him extremely, and my interest in him was most absorbing.

So I lingered on in the Harley-street house long after I was well and strong enough to have quitted it. I was hoping for—I knew not what—but for some conclusion of this trying condition of things to be achieved by chance—without any stir on my part.

Sir George had recovered, I learnt—had even resumed work in his studio. He had made many inquiries as to my state of health. To Mole he had openly spoken of me as his son. His manner had been alert, and energetic—almost cheerful, I was informed.

The man in possession had disappeared. Sir George had found means to satisfy the more impor-

fortunate of his creditors. He appeared, indeed, to be now well supplied with money again. He had been occasionally absent, and he still kept irregular hours.

It was very late one night—or rather I should say that it was in the early hours of morning—when I heard, as I lay restless in my bed, the street-door close; and I knew that Sir George had returned home. For a while all was silence. Then came the unaccustomed sound of some one mounting the stairs. It could only be Sir George. He was visiting his studio on the first-floor? No—he was still ascending. He had passed the second-floor. He was on the landing outside my door. The handle was softly turned, and he entered—a tall figure, wrapped in a long dressing-gown, and carrying a lighted candle, the flame of which he shaded with his hand.

He advanced into the middle of the room, and then stopped suddenly with a start.

“You are awake, Duke?” he said gently. “My boy, I did not mean to disturb you. I was anxious to know how you slept, that was all. You have been ill, you know, but you are better now, thank God. I came up last night, but you were sleeping soundly then, with a strange look of your mother on your

face. I never noticed it before. It was fancy, perhaps ; a painter's fancy ; we're privileged to be fanciful about likenesses. The room strikes cold—you should have a fire, Duke ; and they've given you but a thin coverlet, my poor boy." He took off his dressing-down, and spread it over the bed. "That's better, I think. There, I'll not disturb you further. Something I had to say, but it was not much. You'll not quit me, Duke, stealthily, without a word ? You're sure ? I've been dreading that so much. My boy, it would break my heart—and I have a heart, so I find." There was something of anguish in his look and tone, as he said this. "I came to see that you were still here, to make sure ; it was that brought me, at least, I think so. And to tell you, if I could, that you are very dear to me, Duke, my son. But—there is your mother to be thought of ; you will not forget her ; you will be true to her, whatever happens. I submit myself humbly to her decision and to yours ; only, when you can, think of me as your father. Say the word over to yourself, again and again, until it becomes at last a thing to be believed and felt. Now try and rest. God bless you, Duke. Your mother has prayed that often, I know ; and surely her prayers will be heard, though mine may not."

He bent over me and pressed his lips upon my forehead. His tears fell upon my face. Then very softly he withdrew.

His manner had been most simple and tender; scarcely a trace of his old artificial air of courtesy was now perceptible. Yet a suspicion remained with me that he had not said all he had designed to say—that something occupied him to which he could not give expression.

Mole's solicitude on my account was most complete at this time. It was by his counsel I undertook, so soon as I had sufficiently regained strength, various excursions about the environs of London, in quest of fresh air and new scenes. He was my companion, escaping without difficulty from his duties in the studio, and labouring incessantly to cheer me by the liveliness of his talk, the while, in deference to my depression, he curbed his high spirits somewhat, and refrained from exuberance of levity. Nothing, indeed, could be kinder or more considerate than his bearing towards me during this very trying period of my life.

Mention of Sir George he prudently withheld almost altogether. But he discoursed much of his own early life and its vicissitudes—his sense of the sufferings his profession had entailed upon him

being much mitigated by a perception of its humours. He had plans for the future, confessing to weariness of his labours and position as a painter. He thought of visiting America; not as an actor, however. That had been feasible once, but was so no longer, he admitted. But something in the way of stage management, he thought, might be open to him. Or he would go as secretary to—why not Miss Darlington? She had been offered an engagement in the States. She would accept it, of course, sooner or later. Kean was the first actor who boasted a secretary; but the thing was becoming common enough now. Rosetta must have a secretary. Could she secure a better than Fane Mauleverer? For in such case he intended to resume his professional name. As to the question of propriety—he understood they were particular on that head in America—what did I think of it? Surely, scandal would be hushed in the presence of his bald head. Or, if need be, he'd “make up,” as a patriarch of a most superannuated description, and pledge himself never to wash the paint off his face during the whole period of his sojourn in the States. Or he even would marry Bembridge—for, of course Bembridge was going too. Miss Darlington would not stir without her. He thought her success

in America would be quite unprecedented—he was convinced of it. They had never had anything like her in America yet. And—there was another thing—would I entrust him with a copy of my tragedy? What did I say to “The Daughter of the Doge” being produced in New York? I could easily introduce a part for Bembridge—something like the Nurse in “Romeo and Juliet.” A great success was really quite possible. He would do all he could for the work. Upon that I might confidently rely. If necessary, he would even go on as one of the senators—or one of the bravos—he did not care which. The time had gone by for his appearing as the Doge or as Ludovico, although, a little while back, he felt satisfied, either part would have fitted him like a glove. Would I turn the matter over in my mind? All this was part of his plan for comforting me.

He spoke very tenderly of poor Tony’s death, and with genuine grief. He greatly gratified me by his cordial way of sounding the poor boy’s praises. He had seen Vickery, it appeared, and found him in a tolerably hopeful state. I judged that the old man still looked to saving something for Rachel out of the wreck of her father’s estate.



And with Vickery, he told me, he had discussed the question of Rosetta's marriage. It was clearly invalid. Lord Overbury's wife—the divorced Lady Wycherley—still survived. That was beyond question. Even had it been otherwise, where would have been the advantage? Lord Overbury had no property in Scotland, where only his marriage with Rosetta could possibly have held good. Was it not better that she should be free from him and all claims on his part?

We had walked some distance along the western road I knew so well, from my journeys to and from home. Turning towards town, we stopped to rest at an old, red-roofed, gable-windowed wayside tavern that has long since vanished. It was part inn, part farm-house—much frequented by drovers and carriers, with straddling horse-troughs and a swinging sign-board in front, and spacious yards and barn-like stables in the rear. In its rude, old parlour, with wainscoted walls and sanded floors, we remained some hours. Mole, after his manner, made friends with its frequenters, for the most part graziers, salesmen, market gardeners, and tradesmen of a humble sort. There was much animated conversation, smoking of pipes, and circulation of glasses.

It was dark night and late as we passed down Piccadilly. We turned out of our way a little to the left, that Mole might point out to me "Crocky's," as he called it, the giant gaming club in St. James's Street.

Suddenly he gripped my arm tightly, and drew me back.

A figure, wrapped in an ample Spanish cloak such as gentlemen of fashion then wore in winter or at night over evening dress, was descending the steps of the stately mansion.

"Sir George!" whispered Mole.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### HAZARD.

SIR GEORGE crossed the road, not turning to the north towards Harley-street, as I had expected him to do, but walking swiftly in an easterly direction. With what object? We could not tell. It was no business of ours—decidedly. We followed him at a little distance, however.

Our agreement to do this was unspoken; it seemed a course irresistible to both of us. A momentary sense of shame, I certainly felt; I was, I knew, playing the part of a spy; unworthily dogging the footsteps of my own father. But my curiosity was excited; and, moreover, it was only from time to time that I could convince myself that I was in truth Sir George's son. The fact had still only an intermittent reality for me.

Mole, I think, was wholly without scruple on the subject. He was resolved upon ascertaining his

employer's errand. He perceived a certain mystery in the case; and that he was bent upon solving, if possible.

Sir George hastened on, threading various streets, and approaching the purlieus of Leicester-square. He stopped at last in a narrow, ill-looking thoroughfare. We halted also some thirty yards behind him. Suddenly we missed him.

"I begin to understand," said Mole, after a few moments' reflection. "Turn up the collar of your coat, Duke. Pull your hat well down on your forehead. That's it. Come on further. We're going to see a little life. Don't be frightened; only keep close to me, whatever happens, mind that. Now then. This is what's called 'a silver hell.'"

He tapped gently at the door of a dingy house, in the windows of which no light whatever appeared. All was darkness. Presently a little wicket was opened. Mole spoke in a low voice through the bars to some one inside.

"All right!"

We were admitted: Mole thrusting his arm under mine, and drawing me in with him. A man wearing a ragged fur cap, and a watchman's coat, with a red comforter wound round his neck, stood behind the door. With him Mole seemed to be well

acquainted. I had often before been impressed by the fact that Mole's friendships and intimacies were quite innumerable. He seemed to know and to be known by the whole human race—to be on amicable terms, inclining towards jocosity, with everybody. He always obtained recognition wherever he went. To hackney-coachmen and crossing-sweepers, I had noted, he was especially known, and I had found him to be on a familiar footing with street-traders in matches, and even with beggars.

“When I first knew that man,” he whispered to me, “he was under-prompter at Warwick. They said then, that he had once kept his hunters and a pack of hounds. I never felt sure about that. Now he's—what you see.”

We were advancing along a dark, narrow passage towards a room at the back, from which a great noise was proceeding. On our way we were brushed against by some one hurrying out, much muffled up. Indeed, muffling up seemed to be the fashion with all that night.

“George is here. Look out!” he whispered to Mole as he passed. “I'm off.”

By “George,” he clearly meant Sir George.

“Propert!” Mole explained to me, for I had failed to recognise him. “To think of his being

here! But, like master like man. I always had a suspicion that Propert punted. Now, keep close."

We entered a large room upon the ground floor, with some remains of decoration of a tawdry sort upon its walls. The ceiling was low, and much blackened by the fumes of a gandy lamp hanging from it and so shaded as to cast its oily, yellow rays as forcibly as possible upon the green baize cover of a large circular table beneath. In this way the sides and corners of the chamber were left in comparative obscurity. The windows were strongly barred and secured by outside shutters. There was an absolute want of ventilation. The heat was intense, and the vitiated atmosphere was heavily laden with tobacco smoke. From this cause there was a dense and blinding fog. An excited crowd had gathered round the table. The uproar was very great.

Mole told me in a whisper something of the game that was being played. It was, he said, "French hazard." Small wooden bowls, rakes, and sundry counters formed the furniture of the table, which had a deeply-bevilled edge, to prevent, as I perceived, the dice from falling off and

landing on the floor. A "croupier" occupied a raised high-backed chair, placed on one side of the room.

"Make your game, gentlemen, make your game!" he cried, incessantly, in harsh hoarse tones. "Make your game! We bet the odds against nicks and couplets. Dice, Mr. Duberly. In one moment, gentlemen. Waiter—cigars and champagne! We've the best of refreshments, gentlemen. Waiter, soda and brandy to the gentleman on the left!"

Mr. Duberly, a shabby-looking man with a red nose, a green shade hiding one of his eyes, was the "vice croupier," it seemed. He opened a little packet containing three pairs of dice, and shook them together in one of the wooden bowls. In the "gentleman on the left," wearing a white box coat, with a shawl of many bright colours wrapped round his neck, I soon recognised—Jack Rumsey the pugilist! He was much changed, however, since I had seen him combating the Mudlark, in Chingley Bottom. He had lost the simple, almost rustic expression that had then distinguished him. His face wore now, indeed, a thoroughly villainous look; it was seamed with scars, and discoloured with bruises. His features appeared to have been

flattened and battered out of shape. And his whole aspect and bearing were disreputable and degraded in the extreme. Yet he had once, and not so very long since, been a little curly-haired, rosy-cheeked, carter boy, on old Jobling's farm !

He was far from sober, and was very rude and boisterous. He flung some money on the table, and taking up the dice, cried, "Seven's the main !"

"Seven's a nick !" said the croupier, paying the stakes. The caster had won.

"Eight's the main !" and he threw again.

"Eight the caster has to five; eight with the quattrès. No gentleman on the doublets." Again the caster had won.

"He's been winning all night, I hear," said Mole in my ear. "The Baker they call him. He lost the fight at Hurst Green the other day. They say he sold it. He's been very flush of money ever since."

"Seven's the main !"

"Deuce ace. The caster's out," cried the croupier, raking up the stakes. The bank had won this time. It was another player's turn to throw the dice.

Even with Mole's assistance it was some time before I could comprehend the game. He avowed it



to be very simple ; still, as I judged, it was attended with many complications. But the circumstances were certainly not favourable to careful study of the matter. The heat of the room was stifling ; the noise was deafening. The croupier kept up his hoarse cries of " Make your game, gentlemen, make your game ! " varying his speech every now and then by recommendation of the refreshments to be obtained in the room. " Cigars and champagne, gentlemen ; brandy and soda ; ham and roast chicken on the sideboard ; cold round of beef and lobster salad ; the best of port and sherry ; cigars and champagne, gentlemen. Make your game, gentlemen ! We bet the odds against nicks and doublets ! " And the betting of the players and bystanders — the laying and taking of the " odds," declared by the " groom porter," and calculated apparently with mathematic nicety — contributed greatly to the din. Moreover, there was much drunken shouting, with rude jesting, unmeaning cries, and tumult of all kinds. It was, to my thinking, a most extraordinary scene.

This much of the game I did learn. There were five " mains " upon the dice : five, six, seven, eight, and nine. Of these the player, moved either by accident or superstition, mentally selected one,

which he called aloud as he shook the box and ejected the dice. If he happened to throw the exact number called, he "nicked" it and won. Throwing any other number, with some few exceptions prescribed by the rules of the game, he neither won nor lost; but the new number thrown became his "chance," and if he could succeed in repeating it before throwing again his "main," the number he had originally called, he won; if otherwise, he lost. In other words, having failed to throw his "main," he would lose his stake, but for the interposition of his second throw, which gave him yet his "chance" of winning. And meantime a most important element of the game had come into force—the laying and taking of the odds caused by the probabilities and the relative proportions of the "main" and the "chance." These had been accurately systematised and were subject to no variation.

Further into the mysteries of "hazard" I need hardly enter. Indeed, I must admit that my acquaintance with the subject remains most imperfect, even now; while the game itself can claim to possess in these times little more than an anti-quarian kind of interest.

I had become, almost in spite of myself, so occupied in watching the progress and vicissitudes

of the game, that I was in some danger of forgetting the object of our entering the gambling-house. It was soon plain to me, however, that the chance of our presence being noted was less imminent than I had supposed. We stood in the rear of the players, and out of reach of the rays of the lamp. The eyes of all in the room were bent upon the table, and absorbed by the proceedings of the players. As each caster failed at length in his throws the dice box was passed to the next person upon his left, who at once continued the game.

As yet I had not discovered Sir George. Suddenly I felt Mole's warning pressure upon my arm. I had advanced too near to the table ; I was entering the lamp's circle of light. I drew back instantly. Sir George was standing nearly opposite to me in the thick of the crowd. He had raised the fur collar of his cloak, and little of his face was to be seen. He appeared intent upon the game ; and I felt assured that he had not as yet observed me.

Quickly I looked away from him : impressed with the conviction—unreasonable enough perhaps, yet not to be resisted—that if I fixed my eyes upon him too constantly, he would somehow become conscious of the fact, and would in turn look at me.

I glanced towards the players on either side of him. One with a white, bristling chin, bleared eyes and sodden inflamed features, especially attracted my attention. As my gaze rested upon him I could scarcely restrain a cry of surprise.

Within a few feet of Sir George stood Lord Overbury ! I could not be mistaken.

The dice box had now come to his hands.

“Five’s the main !” he screamed in his old wild way. He shook the dice-box noisily, holding his hand on high, and swaying about, pushing his neighbours on either side away from him, so that he might have ample room for his operations.

Of what followed I had no clear understanding at the time, and I have even now but a confused sense. All was so sudden and violent as to be most perplexing.

It seemed that, by the laws of hazard, any player was fairly entitled at any moment of the game to demand fresh dice ; and that this might be done even after the main had been called, and the dice were in the act of falling upon the table.

Sir George had exercised his right as a player. His clear ringing voice had called “dice” just as the main was thrown. It was therefore voided.

Calling five as his "main," Lord Overbury—it seemed—had thrown seven. He had failed to "nick his main," but still the throw had promised success. For now seven would have been his "chance" to win, the odds being three to two in his favour. He dashed the empty dice-box in Sir George's face.

The anger of the caster at being interrupted was shared by many betting on the issue. Sir George was denounced as an officious intermeddler. There were screams of rage, fierce oaths and furious threats. Fists were shaken at him, and sticks were raised and brandished in the air. The lamp was struck by accident or design, and set swinging to and fro, spilling hot oil upon the green table beneath. I found myself pushed hither and thither. It was with difficulty I could keep in Mole's neighbourhood.

Then occurred a scuffle; of the details I could form no judgment. But I saw that Sir George had seized Lord Overbury by the throat. The crowd seemed to surge about the room. I felt myself lifted off the ground. Jack Rumsey was striking to the right and left of him, with some confused aim, it seemed to me, at assisting his patron, Lord Overbury.

Presently the lamp was extinguished. A sudden lurch of the throng overthrew the table.

"Keep close," I heard Mole whisper in the darkness, "hold tight to my arm. Let's get out of this. I know the way. Whatever you do, keep close to me."

## CHAPTER XIX.

### SATISFACTION.

I FOUND myself again in the street, outside the gaming house. How pure and fresh the night air seemed! What did it matter that it was raining heavily?

"Are you hurt, Duke? Have you lost anything?" asked Mole, panting asthmatically after his exertions. "Here, come under shelter. We need not get wet through, anyhow."

He drew me under an archway leading to a stable-yard, some fifty yards distance from the scene of our late adventures.

My toes had been much trodden on, and I felt that my legs and ankles were bruised with kicks. The bow of my cravat had been wrested round to the nape of my neck, and my clothes were soiled and crumpled and even torn in places. Some unfriendly or unwitting hand had thrust down my

hat nearly over my eyes, seriously to the injury of its gloss and form. But, otherwise, I had not suffered. My purse and watch were safe.

“It was fast and furious while it lasted,” said Mole, presently, when he had recovered his breath a little. “There are always men in those places who are ready to make the best or the worst of any little disturbance.”

“A little disturbance!”

“I only escaped the Baker’s fist by half an inch,” he continued. “His blow landed on the edge of the door-post. I hoped he liked the result. Some one, I know, felt for my watch, but abandoned the attempt. Perhaps he guessed the truth—that the article is not quite so valuable as it looks. There was a precious set there to-night. Who were they all? My dear boy, how should I know? Every sort and condition. Some I recognised, but not all; that could scarcely be. Gentlemen—you could see that for yourself. Yes, and blackguards too; very much so indeed. Honest and dishonest, especially the latter. You see the green table is like the hunting-field—it brings classes together who would not perhaps meet much otherwise. It certainly has that merit. And so, after a fashion, it promotes social inter-



course—also fights, and robberies, and scoundrelism generally. A precious set, as I said. The ring was well represented, and the turf; the King's Bench Prison, the Fleet, and the Insolvent Court; St. James's, and St. Giles's too, I shouldn't wonder. The Army and—no, not the Church, perhaps, on this occasion, although there's no knowing; for the Fine Arts—were not *we* there: you and I, Duke, and Sir George? And the peerage—but you saw, of course. Sir George had him by the throat. 'Don't strangle the man!' You heard them cry that? An old quarrel, to my thinking. Sir George was there on purpose to meet that man. That's the fact; you may be sure of it. He could have gone there for no other reason."

Was this so? I asked myself. Indeed, it seemed very probable.

"Hush!" He brought me more beneath the shadow of the archway. Two other refugees, apparently from the gaming-house, had also sought shelter from the rain. They seemed wholly unconscious of our presence, as they stood together conversing in a low tone.

"I know the tall one," Mole whispered. "Colonel Delmar of the Coldstreams; a friend of Sir George's. The other man is a stranger to me. Keep quiet."

"It's an unlucky affair," I could hear one say. "Most unlucky, all things considered. It can only bring discredit on all concerned. But there really seems to be no alternative."

"Apology in such a case is out of the question, of course," said the other man presently. He spoke with an Irish accent.

"Then the thing must go on. A blow was struck, no doubt."

"Blows were exchanged, as I understand. I did not see all that happened. It was a sort of drunken brawl, I take it. And then the place—the circumstances. It's a very awkward business." Their voices sunk to a whisper.

Mole stole cautiously forward to hear more if possible. The colloquy lasted some minutes further; but little of it was audible where I stood, owing in some measure to the plashing noise of the rain, which had increased in violence. Then, a hackney coach passed. The two men hailed and entered it, leaving us still in shadow.

"There's to be a duel, Duke. So much is certain. You can easily guess who are to be the principals in the affair. Sir George and Lord Overbury. So far as I could learn the details are not arranged. At any rate the meeting will not be for

more than four-and-twenty hours. The place—” He hesitated, and seemed, I thought, trying to read my face in the darkness. “But no matter for the place,” he resumed, hurriedly.

“They did not mention it?”

“I could hear nothing, very distinctly,” he replied—with an air of evasion, as it seemed to me. “And now, my young friend, I think you must have seen about enough of what’s called ‘life’ for one while, and had better make the best of your way home, and get to bed.”

“You’re sure there’s to be a duel, Mole?”

“That may be taken for granted. After what has happened, a duel is a matter of necessity. So the code of honour rules—if I know anything about it, and I don’t know very much perhaps. But gentlemen must differ at times; and then, I suppose, they must proceed to settle their differences in the old established way. Who—what—is to prevent them? Not you or I, most certainly. The law? Well, they risk that. When the law stands in people’s way, they’re apt to climb over it, or break through it, or get round it, as best they may. The law must take care of itself in such case, and avenge the violence done it—if it knows how.”

In those days duelling was judged to be more

reasonable and defensible than now it is. It was already declining, perhaps; but public opinion had not, as yet, pronounced very decidedly upon the subject. It was still held by many to be a sort of safeguard of civilisation, promoting good breeding and decorous manners.

The thought of a duel between Sir George and Lord Overbury disquieted me gravely. Knowing what I knew of the relations existing between them, however, it seemed a natural and inevitable thing. It did not occur to me to disapprove it. Still less was I prompted to invoke the action of the law with a view to its hindrance, even had such a step been possible to me. My own feeling against Lord Overbury was most bitter. That his misdeeds merited the severest chastisement, I was well assured. Indeed, boy as I was, with few chivalric pretensions, perhaps, or little superfluous courage, I was stirred by an ardent longing to stand in Sir George's place and inflict punishment upon the man whose conduct to my mother had been so shameful and so cruel.

I quitted Mole with an understanding that we were to meet again very speedily.

I lay awake for some hours waiting to hear

the re-entrance of Sir George. He did not return to Harley-street, however. Mole did not re-appear until the evening of the next day.

I was nervous and anxious, oppressed with a dread of impending trouble, tortured with doubts and misgivings. I hoped to see Sir George; yet with no very clear intention as to what I should say or do if we met. I could scarcely expect him to speak to me of the coming duel. Yet he might do so; knowing that his life was about to be imperilled, something he might wish to say to me, something he might have to charge me with, if but a message, a kind word or a tender pressure of his hand. But he never came. I began to feel at last that I was indeed his son, loving him as a son should. If this duel were to involve his death! I trembled at the thought.

The evening brought Mole. He looked grave and his manner was unusually staid. He could not come sooner, he said. He had been much occupied all day long. Yes, he had something to tell me if I would only be patient. The duel was to be on the morrow—early—as soon as it was light.

He had been speaking in a whisper, but he checked himself suddenly to go to the door of the studio, listen on the landing outside, and make sure

that there was no one to overhear him. Then he resumed :—

At Chalk Farm. Was Sir George a good shot, did I think? Probably not. At any rate he had been practising for some hours, so Mole had ascertained, at a Shooting Gallery in the Westminster Bridge Road. In Mole's opinion, he had never before fired a pistol. Mole admitted, however, that he might be mistaken on that subject.

For the sake of convenience and to avert suspicion, he was sharing Colonel Delmar's lodgings, in the Albany. It was not likely that he would return to Harley-street until after the duel.

This was the sum of Mole's information. Of Lord Overbury's movements he had learnt nothing. He mentioned, moreover, that his lordship had taken part in many duels, and was reputed to be a dangerous adversary. Still it was probable that his intemperate method of life would affect the certainty of aim for which he had once been famous.

We arranged to proceed in the direction of Chalk Farm in the morning, so as to learn, as soon as might be, the issue of the duel. To be in readiness to start, Mole improvised a bed in the upper studio—making free use of its draperies and hangings.

For hours I could not sleep. I was still hoping to see Sir George again—for ever fancying that I heard him moving to and fro in the lower chambers of the house. It was but fancy.

Some uneasy rest came to me at last. It was still dark, although there were glimmerings of early morning twilight about the room when Mole entered to rouse me. He was but half-dressed; I could just note the white of his shirt-sleeves, and I could hear the rattle of his braces trailing behind him. He was bare-footed, I knew, by the padding sound of his steps on the floor.

“It’s precious cold, Duke,” he said, with chattering teeth, “and there’s a thick fog; but it will be clearer in the open, I dare say. Make haste and get up. It’s about time we were off. However, if they’ve got this fog out towards Hampstead, they can’t do much. I don’t see my way to breakfast. We must manage that by-and-by, as well as we can. I’ve got a flask of brandy with me, that’s one comfort. We shall have to walk, you know. A coach is a matter of chance at this hour. I wish I’d thought of that over-night. One always forgets something.”

We started northward, hurrying along the silent streets, in which the lamps were still burning, and

beating our hands together to warm them. The ground was white with frost. We crossed the New Road, and made for the pasture land, which had been partly enclosed and planted to form the Regent's Park.

The fog was still very thick, but there seemed promise of its clearing as we left the houses behind us; there were even now and then gleams of hazy sunlight discernible towards the east.

"We're late, I fear," said Mole, as we heard the clock of Marylebone church striking the hour, the thick atmosphere muffling the sound. "We must push on. I think we're in the right path, but this mist is very bewildering."

The ground was rough and broken, and our progress was far from rapid. We said but little. Nervous anxiety and terror kept me silent. I could only question Mole now and then about our road. It was certain, from consideration of the time that had elapsed, and the fact that we had not ceased to move on, that we must be near to the scene of action.

"We've borne too far to the left, I'm thinking," said Mole, pausing for a moment. He breathed with difficulty, and was evidently much fatigued; he removed his hat to dab his forehead with his



handkerchief. "It seems pretty clear down yonder. Are those figures moving about under that row of trees?"

We were crossing a field of rank grass, having forced a passage through the hedge, and jumped a ditch. I seemed to be back at Purrington!

The land was marshy, with merely a thin frozen crust of firm surface. I found my feet sinking in to my ankles.

"Surely that's Chalk Farm," said Mole. He pointed to an object some two hundred yards in front of us.

The sun feebly pierced the mist for a moment. I could just discern a white-washed gabled house, with what looked like a large black barn behind it. There were trees on either side, with sloping ground below.

"We're just at the foot of the hill. Hush! What's that noise? There are voices behind us. We are followed. Keep close to the hedge, and don't speak."

I obeyed this injunction. Two or three men ran past quite close to us. I could plainly hear their hard breathing as they went by.

"Peelers!" said Mole. That was the nickname of the new police in those days.

"We must take care or we shall get into trouble. Come on as quietly as you can."

Just then we heard pistol shots on the low ground to our left, closely followed by much shouting—and afterwards, from some distance, the sounds of the creaking of harness and the rattling of coach wheels. Then all was silent again.

"It's over," said Mole. "We're too late; but we may learn something a little further on. The fog's cleared off the lower land there. They must have fought just under that line of trees yonder."

## CHAPTER XX.

### CHALK FARM.

As we advanced we met the police returning. They had with them a prisoner. I pressed forward anxiously. But I soon perceived that the man was neither Lord Overbury nor my father.

“They felt bound to do something, I suppose,” Mole said, in a low voice. “So they’ve captured Jack Rumsey. What brought him here, I wonder? But perhaps *we* need not ask. Curiosity. It seems certain that the others have got clear away. But what was the good of taking Jack? He’ll be discharged, of course; or held to bail to answer a charge of aiding and abetting a breach of the peace—something of that sort. But they can’t prove anything against him, really. Perhaps he came moved by fidelity to his patron, Lord Overbury—to help him, after a rough fashion, if occasion arose.

It's possible. We shall know more about it, by-and-by."

The police passed on with the Baker in custody. We watched them until they were out of sight, and then descended to the row of trees, close under whose shelter, as we decided, the duel had taken place.

There was no one to be seen. The spot, sheltered by the slope of the hill on one side, and screened by the trees on the other, was now quite deserted. But on a little natural platform of smooth ground we discovered footmarks. The white frost on the turf had been disturbed in places. Here, some twelve paces apart, the combatants had been posted, probably; there were traces of measurement by footsteps upon the grass. Here, no doubt, the seconds had stood close under the shadow of a leafless oak. And further on were the dints of coach wheels upon the elastic ground.

"Just the very place for a duel," said Mole, reflectively. "Many a man has got his quietus here. But no harm has been done this morning, as I understand the matter." The scene appeared to have a sort of fascination for him. He assumed the attitude of a duellist; standing erect, sideways, and making every effort to reduce his form to the slenderest pro-

portions possible. Then he went through the action of slowly raising an imaginary pistol, keeping his elbow close to his side, and firing at a supposititious antagonist. He even imitated with his mouth the "clicking" sound of the lock.

"I have never been 'out,'" he said gravely, "but I haven't a doubt that I should be able to comport myself 'upon the ground' with extreme propriety. You see there's a good deal of dramatic effect about a duel; and so far, I've had just the right sort of training. But you're looking very white and faint, Duke, my lad; do you know that? It's been a little too much for you, I dare say. And then, of course, you're anxious about Sir George. I'm always forgetting that he's your father. He forgot it so long, himself; and I'm sure you must have a difficulty sometimes in remembering it. We'll go on to Chalk Farm. We may learn something more there. At any rate, we can get breakfast, I've no doubt. And really this duelling's exhausting work: involving getting up in the middle of the night, and a long walk across country on a cold morning. I was wondering what was the matter with me. I've discovered now—I'm hungry! Look, Duke, how the sun's breaking up the mist; it's like rolling from the stage a scene that's done

with—or like wiping off a scumble of paint from a picture. Isn't it, now? Cheer up, Duke. Lean on me if you're tired. I've quite got my breath again—and it's but a step from here to the house."

We learnt little at Chalk Farm—in part a small farm-house and in part a rural tavern—finding no great willingness to afford us any information. Pistol shots had been heard from the lower ground, but nothing had been seen, we were told, owing to the density of the mist. A substantial breakfast was set before us, to which Mole did every justice. For my part, I was too sad and sick at heart to eat.

We remained at Chalk Farm for an hour or two. The sun had now risen, and the day was very bright and pleasant. We looked on London stretching out below us beyond the intervening expanse of green fields, with the dome of St. Paul's rising above it, as though built in the clouds. The place was very still, save only from the cheery sounds and echoes of farm labour. In a field behind the house the ploughshare was at work, designing in rich brown hues its regular pattern of ridge and furrow. I remember tossing crumbs from the window of the inn parlour for the behoof of a robin red-breast.

From one of the servants of the house Mole elicited that in the early morning two gentlemen had remained for some time hidden behind the farm stables; that then, finding all safe, they had stolen away across the fields to the west of Hampstead. The description given did not enable us to connect these certainly with the duel, still less to identify either as Lord Overbury or Sir George. But it seemed likely that, whoever they were, they felt themselves implicated in the affair, and were avoiding the observation of the police.

We quitted Chalk Farm, and striking into the high road, hailed the midday stage coach from Hampstead, and returned to town. Mole promised to obtain all the information he could, and to meet me in the evening at his favourite tavern, the Red Bull, in Vineyard Yard.

I passed a miserable day enough. I hoped every moment that Sir George would return to Harley-street. But he never came. His absence was indeed explicable enough. A policeman had called enquiring for him: withdrawing, however, when he found his errand vain. He continued, however, as I afterwards ascertained, to watch the house for some days.

A mysterious paragraph in an evening news-

paper invited public attention to the "hostile encounter," as it was called, at Chalk Farm. The initials only of the parties concerned were furnished, but these conveyed sufficient information.

Mole had something to tell. He had seen Jack Rumsey, who had been bailed by his friends, and who was subsequently—although there was really no substantial charge against him relative to the present instance, whatever his former infringements of the law might have been—bound over to keep the peace for six months.

The Baker had, as a bystander, seen the duel from a little distance. He had accidentally learnt the arrangements from his patron on the previous night. Whatever his evidence may have been worth on such a question, he described Lord Overbury's conduct throughout the duel as perfectly unimpeachable. He had come upon the ground in a state of strict sobriety, and had behaved like a thorough gentleman, placing himself entirely in the hands of his second, Major O'Gorman, as it seemed, an Irish Member of Parliament. "I know un well," the Baker had stated; "his lordship could be a real gentleman when a' chose, and a' could be a right-down blackguard, too. Well, this turn a' were a gentleman, and no mistake. No one's ever



made doubt of's pluck; but of's manners I've oft heerd folks question. I can't abide fire-arms myself, and wouldn't face a pistol for any money. But 'twer different with his lordship, as 'tis, may be, with most gentlefolks. There was ne'er a fault to find with 'un.

The duellists had fired together upon a given signal. To Jack Rumsey's thinking—but he admitted that he had been half-hidden by a tree, lest he should be seen, and for fear he should himself be hit—and, moreover, the fog had still been thick—Lord Overbury had fired in the air. His adversary's aim had been direct. "As cold and calm as ice a' were," said the Baker. "Never saw such a man before. I shut my eyes when the shooting come. I always did when a lad, trusted with an old musket and scaring the rooks off Farmer Jobling's wheat."

Lord Overbury had been hit in the shoulder, but not seriously, it was believed. Jack saw the doctor, as he supposed, run out to him from under the shelter of the trees. Then came a cry of alarm. The police were seen approaching across the fields. The party dispersed—Lord Overbury moving without difficulty to a hackney coach that had been in attendance at a little distance. The other party

went off in another direction. In his alarm and confusion Jack had hesitated, and finally taking a wrong turning, found himself in the arms of the police. That was all he had to tell. It was the first duel he had ever witnessed, he said, and it should be the last. He greatly preferred a prize fight, holding it to be a much fairer way of settling a dispute. The best man won and took the battle money.

The duel occasioned some stir and comment, but after a little while it seemed to escape from public attention. Duels were not then of unusual occurrence. And probably some other matter—though I forget what now—came presently to engross regard. The general mind is sieve-like, and cannot hold much for long.

From all I could ascertain, it appeared clear that the principals and their seconds had quitted the country, designing probably to remain abroad until all danger of their arrest had ceased. It was thought that after a certain lapse of time the authorities would not concern themselves further about the matter. It was possible, of course, that the duel might be renewed on the other side of the channel; but no breach of English law would be involved in that proceeding. And if, as Jack

Rumsey had stated, Lord Overbury was really wounded, the seconds might reasonably hold that a due measure of satisfaction had been obtained by his adversary.

I remained in the house in Harley-street. All who enquired there for Sir George were informed that he had left England for the Continent, and that the period of return was uncertain.

One morning I discovered Probert busily engaged in cording a large box. He was startled by my approach, and his manner struck me as confused and embarrassed.

“Well, the fact is, sir,” he explained rather sullenly, “the game’s up. Sir George won’t come back. One must look after one’s own interests. I’m going into the country for a bit of a holiday, that’s the truth, sir, and after that, I must see about getting another service. So I’ve packed up my things, sir, all in readiness, and the carrier’s going to call for them, this evening. I’ve nothing in the box, I do assure you, sir”—and here he tightened its cording—“that isn’t strictly my own. For that matter, if you suspect me, sir, you’re quite welcome to make a search.” Here he took care to turn the lock, however, and to thrust the key into his pocket. “There’s nothing in it, really, but rubbish and

trifles, though it seems heavy, I don't mind owning. But you see, sir, I've been a good many years with Sir George, and in service things accumulate somehow. Sir George was always liberal as to his cast clothes, and articles of dress—he was inclined to be fanciful and extravagant in that way, sir, and if a thing didn't quite suit his taste—a waistcoat, or a pair of silk stockings, or dress shoes, or what not—he'd say, 'Here, Propert, take this out of my sight, and do what you like with it; only get rid of it, and don't let me set eyes on it any more.' I've heard him say that a many times, sir. But the things don't amount to much, sir; after all. Servants' perquisites are worth little enough when they come to be dealt with. It's surprising the fuss as some folks make about them when all's considered. Bless you there's nothing but trifles and rubbish here." And he gave the box a scornful kick.

I did not question his statement. Yet when afterwards many small articles of value, the property of Sir George, were missing, I could not restrain a suspicion that they had departed in Propert's possession. Otherwise how could the absence be accounted for of the gold snuff-box, presented by Cardinal Gonsalvi; the diamond rings, received

from the Pope, from the Emperor of Russia, and the King of Denmark ; the bonbonnière of precious stones set in gold, given by Charles the Tenth, and other tributes to Sir George's merits and services awarded him by royal and illustrious personages ? In any case these vanished about this time, and were not subsequently recovered.

“ I'll wish you good bye, then, Mr. Nightingale, if you'll allow me, sir,” said Propert, as he departed. “ And if I may make bold to offer you a word of advice, sir, I'd say : don't stay here long yourself, sir,—unless, of course, you don't mind any little property you may have here being seized, sir. For—take my word for it, sir, there'll be another execution in here before very long, sir. Folks have got wind of Sir George's affairs, and it's wonderful how greedy some of them is after money, sir. They'd sell up their own father, I do believe, sir, if he but owed them a trifle. Good bye, sir, and my humble duty to you, Mr. Nightingale.”

## CHAPTER XXI.

### EXIT.

I took Propert's advice, and it was as well I did so ; for the day after I left Sir George's house it was stripped by his creditors.

I resumed occupation of my lodgings in Featherstone-buildings, just vacated by an articled clerk who had completed his professional noviciate. The rooms wore their old look exactly. Not a touch of fresh paint or of whitewash had they undergone. The landlady despondently repeated her hope that I would be steady. It was as though yesterday had come back again. The only perceptible change was in the condition of the easy chair. It was a trifle less easy even than formerly, and a decided infirmity had manifested itself in one of its legs.

There was nothing really to detain me any longer in town. I was without distinct occupation.

Yet still I lingered. Some vague expectation that I might again see Sir George possessed me. My steps were often turned towards Harley-street. The house he had occupied attracted me curiously, almost in spite of myself. I contemplated it often and often, always with a sort of wild hope that I should see the door open and him emerge from it. But it was tenantless, empty, and fast locked; admission to it was no longer obtainable. Its whole aspect had abruptly changed. Already it had acquired a desolate and woe-begone aspect. The shutters were all closed; there was a blind hanging awry, half wrenched away, in one of the windows; some of the panes were broken, the others were thickly crusted with dust and soot; the ironwork about the entrance, the area railings, were rusty; the paint was peeling off the sills and sashes; the steps were soiled and strewn with refuse; even the door plate was growing green with mildew. It was surprising how rapidly neglect had achieved its work and wretchedness seized upon the place. Here had dwelt the most esteemed artist of his time. Beauty and rank and fashion had congregated about him. Even royalty had oftentimes shone resplendent in that now darkened painting room. The King's serjeant-painter had seemed to be the spoilt child

of fortune, the intimate friend of the great, the especial favourite of society the most distinguished. He was famous, courted, admired, even envied; he was prosperous, reputed to be rich. The world indeed had seemed to be at his feet for him to do what he listed with it. But now all was altered. He had disappeared and was already apparently forgotten. It was now as though he had never been.

I saw Mole frequently, but he had no further news to communicate. The general belief appeared to be that Sir George would never return to England. For some time I entertained fond hopes that he would at any rate write to me. But no letter came.

Mole did his best to cheer me up. At this time, however, he was much occupied with his own plans for the future. He manifested much indecision on the subject. Now he spoke of starting on his own account as a painter, with theatrical portraiture as his professional speciality; he thought that in such wise considerable profits were readily to be obtained. Now he meditated establishing a dramatic agency in connection with elocutionary classes for the benefit of aspirants to histrionic honours. Presently I found him resuming his former scheme of be-



coming secretary to a "star" performer—Rosetta for instance—and journeying to the United States. This seemed, indeed, the most likely of his projects, for Rosetta's visit to America, at the close of her London engagement, had really been determined on.

I had seen the actress on several occasions. She had expressed the tenderest sympathy and solicitude both on my account and on that of Sir George, for whom, indeed, she had conceived a regard that had something romantic about it, although of this she was herself perhaps but imperfectly conscious. I noted that she had lost in some measure her old buoyancy and joyousness of manner: that she now, indeed, was almost depressed and sad. But she had experienced certain disappointments I afterwards learnt. As Mole had predicted, some contest as to the characters she should sustain upon the stage had arisen in the theatre, and she had been constrained to yield to the claims of more established players.

As Christmas drew near, I went down to Purrington. That I was warmly welcomed there, I need not say. The story I had to tell of my recent adventures was listened to with great interest. I pleaded earnestly for a compassionate consideration of Sir George's conduct, urging on his behalf the

explanations he had himself addressed to me. My mother was deeply moved. Long since, I think, she had learnt to view mercifully and tenderly her husband's sins against her. The bitterness of her sufferings had passed away; the many years of neglect she had endured had not been wholly sorrowful. Patience and resignation had succeeded to pain and repining; and then had come content, and even a sort of tranquil happiness. The animosity cherished by my uncle she had never really shared; but had rather sought mutely, yet diligently, to modify and subdue it; in her inmost heart protesting strenuously against it; stimulated by it, possibly, to increase of mercy and charity.

My uncle listened to me in silence. That he was affected by what I said I could not doubt. In the milder expression of his face I read abatement of his vindictiveness. Indeed, time had surely brought him a sufficiency of vengeance, if that had been his desire. Sir George's misdeeds had been amply punished. He was ruined, disgraced, a fugitive. But what, I think, chiefly appeased my uncle arose from his old-world sense of retributive justice and atonement for wrongdoing. He approved the duel at Chalk Farm. He was well content that Sir George had shot

his adversary. He would have preferred Lord Overbury's being left dead upon the ground. But still a wound was something.

He never said this in so many words, but I scarcely wrong him, I think, in attributing to him sentiments which may seem barbarous now, but were then generally held to be reasonable and natural enough.

Rachel Monck was still at the farm-house. She looked pale in her dress of deep mourning, and very fragile. Indeed her health had been but infirm of late, and my mother had forbidden her to think of returning to London, for some while at any rate. Imperceptibly she had become an indispensable part of my home. She was greatly loved and prized by all. The influence of her sweet and gentle nature could not but assert itself. To my mother and uncle she was as a newly-found and fondly-cherished daughter. She read to them, and tended and solaced them in a thousand ways. Her beautiful handwriting now adorned the farm books. She relieved my mother of much labour for which her failing sight had now almost incapacitated her. It was pleasant to see Rachel seated at the open window in the little room, paying the farm servants their weekly earnings—received with pulling of

forelocks and bashful looks of thanks—just as in years long past I remembered my mother doing.

In the truthful glances of her soft grey eyes I found tenderness and sympathy—affection even, but not the love I looked for. That was not mine; perhaps never could be mine—given as it was beyond recall to the poor dead boy, sleeping in Purrington churchyard. My mother noted, I am sure, my contemplation of Rachel, which often became more rapt than I was myself fully conscious of. She spoke no word on the subject, however. But something of a new subcurrent of sympathy in her manner informed me that she had discovered the secret of my love.

We spent a very quiet Christmas-tide, not the less happy, however, on that score.

Soon afterwards came letters from Mole. He informed me that Sir George had certainly been heard of in Paris. It was thought that he might now safely return, and the duel being pretty well forgotten, re-establish, if he so pleased, his old fame and success. Presently came tidings announcing, though with some indistinctness, the death of Lord Overbury. The letter contained a cutting from a newspaper. It stated that an inquest had been held upon the body of a man, discovered in a low tavern, much

frequented by pugilists and betting men of an inferior class, in Whitechapel. He had been seized, as it appeared, with an apoplectic fit, mistaken by his boon companions for intoxication. He had been left in a condition of insensibility for some hours; when, at length, surgical aid had been called in, it was found that "the vital spark" had flown. Remedies of all kinds had been plied in vain. Rumsey, a pugilist by profession, and known as "The Baker," had stated that, to the best of his belief, the corpse was that of Lord Overbury. But scanty particulars of the case were furnished; there seemed indeed an anxiety to hush up the matter as much as possible. Nothing was said in regard to the facts of his lordship's life, which indeed did not merit special record. It was intimated, however, that with his demise the Overbury peerage—dating from the time of George the Second—had become extinct. Further, it was stated, that at the period of his death his lordship had been reduced to a state of extreme poverty. A few halfpence only were discovered upon his body, and the expenses of his funeral had been defrayed by private generosity. I attributed this kindly action to Rosetta; but I have no real warrant for the supposition.

I must chronicle that this account of Lord

Overbury's death did not meet with universal acceptance. About Purrington, indeed, there prevailed a general inclination to disbelieve it. Many residents in the neighbourhood of Overbury Hall were prepared to affirm that they had certainly seen his lordship alive and well at a period subsequent to the date assigned in the newspaper to his death. They regarded the report which had been circulated to that effect as a mere stratagem to delude his innumerable creditors. As a peer, however, it was certain that his lordship was free from all danger of arrest. Still, it was frequently asserted that Lord Overbury, slovenly attired, and wearing his old satyr look, had been perceived now crossing the down and now wandering about the park surrounding the great house. Reube, I may mention, was quite confident on this head, and was wont to repeat a long conversation, alleged to have been enjoyed with his lordship—which increased in length and detail as Reube grew older and encountered incredulity—touching a fold of stock sheep upon the uplands towards Steepleborough. Moreover, there was much evidence as to strange lights having been seen at midnight, illumining certain of the windows of Overbury House. In time, a conviction grew that the place was

haunted. To a rising generation the Dark Tower acquired even to excess the character of awe and mystery it had possessed for me, or I had invested it with, in my childish days.

At length, however, belief in the survival of his lordship faded and expired. An alarm of fire one night spread through Purrington, and the farmers were very anxious as to the safety of their ricks and homesteads. Flames were observed issuing from the lower floor of Overbury House. There were no means at hand to cope with a fire of any importance; the nearest engine was at Steepleborough. But, strange to say, the fire did not spread, but presently slackened, and finally went out of itself, for the few buckets of water from the lake thrown upon it could not count for much. The little room in which I had first met Lord Overbury, with all its contents, was destroyed—a black cavity like a gigantic rathole was left disfiguring the grey façade of the building—but otherwise little mischief was done. There was no story afterwards, however, of the reappearance of Lord Overbury. Even those most convinced of his surviving the report of his death, were content to believe that the fire had made a thorough end of him.

To finish with the Dark Tower, I may mention that it remained for many years in Chancery, that

it was subsequently converted into a private asylum for the insane. But when the branch line was made from Steepleborough to West Poolborough the park was intersected, the lake was crossed by an iron bridge, and Overbury House, much altered and reduced in size, was transformed into the Railway Hotel adjoining the Purrington Station.

But this happened quite in recent times, and, therefore, many years later than the events to which my narrative should properly be confined.



## CHAPTER XXII.

### PITY AND PARDON.

It was a long winter, wonderfully mild about Christmas time, but, afterwards unusually severe. We had "a stem" of hard frost, with biting east winds, succeeded by heavy snow-storms. I was reminded of the old time when I had encountered Rosetta, nearly perished with the cold, in Orme's Plantation; when I had ventured upon my most foolish journey by night to Overbury Hall. The farm was revisited by its old wintry disaster, frozen ponds and suffering cattle. Reube was beset with his old difficulties; day and night he was at the folds, combating the snow and striving his best for the preservation of his distressed and shivering flock.

All had been made snug for the night, however. Wearied with many hours' toil and trouble my uncle had fallen asleep by the fireside. He had

but just returned from the frozen water meadows. His hat hung upon the back of his chair; a cloud of steam was rising from his wet boots and gaiters. Rachel, I think, was taking counsel with Kem as to the preparation of something comfortable for his supper.

I had been conversing in a low tone with my mother as to certain plans I entertained. I sought her permission to go abroad in quest of my father, Sir George, of whom nothing had been heard for so long. That was to be my main object, at any rate; but combined with it was a desire to benefit if possible by study of foreign picture galleries.

The journey I proposed was a thing to be viewed with seriousness and even some alarm in those days, especially by one who had lived so many years in seclusion and stillness. My mother hesitated. I could see that my going would grieve her much, and yet I knew that in her heart she approved it. She felt that it was dutiful and right; her own anxiety for tidings of Sir George was not less urgent than my own. For some time past, indeed, her distress on this account had been very sore. Again and again we asked each, vainly enough, What had become of him? What had been his fate? Did he live still?

Something too we had spoken upon another matter. I mean my love for Rachel. This had somehow come to be oftentimes a subject of conversation between us. In truth I had confessed my love to my mother, artfully trusting to gather from her some clue to Rachel's sentiments in regard to myself. My cunning had not advantaged me, however. My mother would not aid me by revealing any secret knowledge she possessed. She declined, indeed, to set forth any opinion on the subject. That she regarded Rachel with great affection, and that so far my choice had her sanction, I was well assured. But, as she said with a smile, "There are things a lover must find out for himself. He can learn them in no other way. Echoes are very deceptive. And what is the worth of hearsay evidence in such a case of all others? As a lawyer you should know, if not as a lover. Besides, a woman may not be conscious of her love until the touchstone of another's is applied to it. But I'm too old to talk of these things; and you, Duke—are you not too young?"

I said, what was indeed the truth at the time, that I no longer felt myself so very young; that of late I had grown older with great rapidity; and that the title of "Young Mr. Nightingale," which

had so often been applied to me—something by way of taunt in many instances—had lost much of its appositeness.

“But are you sure you know your own heart, Duke?”

“I think so. I would I was as sure I knew hers.” And then I stated my fears lest Rachel should accept my suit—supposing her to accept it—not out of her love for me, but moved by a sort of gratitude, and influenced by the thought that I had been the firm friend of poor Tony.

“It might be so,” said my mother, musingly. “But if she loves you, can it matter so very much why she loves you? If it is to be for his sake at first, will it not surely be for your own by-and-by? But love is so jealous; perhaps justly so. Well, Duke, if I’m to advise, I must say—wait.”

“Her love lies in the churchyard yonder, I fear.”

“But can it stay there? She is very young. She has been severely tried, no doubt. Still her heart is not dead, Duke; you can’t think that. There is snow all over the land just now. But can you doubt that the sun will shine forth—that the snow will melt—and the flowers lift their heads, and bud and flower again? Have but patience, Duke;

and wait. Spring will come, and summer in due season. I said that you were still young. Does not this prove it? You have not yet learnt to endure. Disappointment and delay are new to you—and you cannot bear them uncomplainingly. May your burden of care be no heavier than it now is, Duke! But do not fear. Time sets things right. Meanwhile, we can but wait and hope—yes, and pray, my boy.”

There were tears in her eyes as she spoke. What were my sufferings, after all, compared to what hers had been? She drew me towards her and kissed me tenderly on the forehead, smoothing away my hair, just as I remembered her doing long years before, when I was quite a child.

“I can’t think what it is makes the dogs bark so,” said my uncle, stirring in his easy chair.

The dogs were certainly barking; although our conversation had so engaged us that we had not before noticed the fact.

“I hope there’s nothing gone wrong in the farm-yard. We’ve surely had mischief enough for one while.” He took up his hat and prepared to sally forth. “It seems to me there’s something moving in the front garden,” he said presently,

after waiting to listen. "It can't be one of the cattle got loose."

He opened the front door, and stood on the step, looking forth. I joined him. The moon was shining brightly. Rays of ruddy light poured from the house upon the snow-clad garden—which seemed by contrast to acquire a bluish-green tint—with here and there black patches where the shrubs grew.

"I see nothing. Do you, Duke?" I pointed out to him footprints upon the gravel walks. Soon I perceived a figure standing at a few paces distance from the doorway; a man with a thick sprinkling of snow upon his dark dress.

I called to him, but he did not answer. Apparently he did not hear or understand me. I approached him. For the moment I did not recognise him.

"This is the Down Farm, I think?" he said.

His voice—it was broken, and hollow, and tremulous—sent a strange thrill through me.

"And this," he cried, suddenly, as I took his hand, "this is my boy—this is Duke!"

"Father!"

The man was Sir George Nightingale. His hand was cold as a stone. He was thinly clad and wet through. He was standing in snow up to his ankles.

"I've come, Duke," he said, faintly. "I've come, at last. I thought I should have died on the way. I missed the track, and have wandered many miles. But I've seen you again, thank God! thank God! Now lead me in—take me to your mother."

His manner was most strange—he moved like a man in a trance. He was trembling violently—his face was terribly hollow and worn—livid from exposure to the cold. His limbs seemed to have lost strength to sustain him—he swayed and tottered so that I circled him with my arms to save him from falling. I had but a moment to note these things, for I saw the necessity of bringing him at once into the house. He was dying of cold. There was a curious filmy look about his eyes.

My uncle, shocked and bewildered, stared at us vacantly. Yet I can remember that with a sort of involuntary action he removed his hat and stood bareheaded on the door-steps as Sir George, with my help, moved past him.

My mother had issued from the dining-room and was standing in the hall. She wore a startled, perplexed air, but she did not yet fully comprehend what had happened.

"What has happened? Who is this?"

"Mildred!"

It was a cry almost of delirium ; wild and shrill, terrible to hear ; then he half slipped, half sprang from my grasp and fell down heavily at her feet. Something more he said, imploring her pity and her pardon, as I understood, but the words were so indistinctly uttered I could not be certain of their purport. For a moment his arms were stretched out imploringly ; then I heard his hands strike noisily upon the floor.

“George !”

She was on her knees weaving her arms round him, struggling to raise him and to rest his head upon her bosom.

“George, George !” she cried piteously, over and over again. I took his hand ; it was still icy cold. Still I fancied it returned the pressure of mine. Then all movement ceased. It was plain that he had become insensible.

“My husband !” she cried. “Speak to me ; George, speak to me,” and she rained kisses upon his white face.

“He has fainted,” I said.

My uncle left us hurriedly in quest of remedies—Kem emerged from the kitchen ; Rachel was in attendance beside my mother. There was great commotion—and bewilderment—and alarm.



“He does not move!” cried my mother presently, as she rocked to and fro in her great anguish, pressing closely the inanimate form, as though to impart to it her own heart’s warmth and life. “Tell him to speak to me, Duke. He will know your voice—he’s forgotten mine! Tell him to say one word—but one. I love him—I have always loved him. It is my husband. My own dear husband come back to me at last. Forgive him? I’ve nothing to forgive. I love him—I love him. I have never loved but him in all the world. He’s all in all to me. My life, my soul—speak to me, George. He does not move. Oh, God!” she cried in her despair, as she turned and gazed about her with wild beseeching eyes. “Tell him to live, some one—tell him to speak to me. Live, George, live! Speak to me, my husband—” and then she fell swooning back with his head still resting on her bosom.

He never spoke, or stirred, or breathed again.

The death of Sir George Nightingale was duly announced in the newspapers, and occupied public attention for some time. Brief memoirs of him were published, setting forth the leading facts of his professional career with sufficient accuracy.

His early demise was the subject of general regret. It was shown that entirely by his own merits and industry he had risen from a position of comparative obscurity to one of real distinction. High rank among the great English portrait-painters was freely accorded him. There was a disposition to estimate generously his gifts as an artist. A list was furnished of the rewards and dignities conferred upon him at various times. Knighted by his sovereign and appointed serjeant-painter in ordinary, he was also a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour in France; a member of the Royal Academy of London, of the Imperial Academy of Vienna, and also of the academies of Rome, Florence, Venice, Bologna, and Turin. Concerning the details of his private life little was stated; mention was made, however, of his unvarying amiability of character and finished courtesy of manner. It was said further that he had been at all times a liberal patron of the Fine Arts, and was renowned for the generous encouragement and assistance he had afforded to youthful and aspiring talent. The fact that, notwithstanding the popularity he had long enjoyed, and his large professional earnings, he had died in circumstances of some embarrassment, was attributed to the

munificence of his disposition, and the excessive liberality of his charitable donations.

Of the wife who wept her dead husband, of the son who had lost a father, no word was said.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### BY WAY OF EPILOGUE.

AFTER some months spent in travel abroad, I had returned home to take up my abode again at the old farm-house, for a season.

Why did my steps turn towards Purrington church? Well, the truth is that I knew Rachel was to be found there. She too had been away for a while—visiting friends in London, and receiving at their hands, as I understood, some salvage from the wreck of her father's estates. But she could not long be spared; her presence had become so indispensable to my mother, whose health for some time past had been but ailing and infirm. So she had come back, and, out of her old fondness for occupation and beneficence, had undertaken the instruction of a class of village children, assembled two or three times a week in the vestry. So I had walked

to Purrington to meet her and accompany her home again.

As I passed through the churchyard, I noted that fresh flowers had been strewn upon poor Tony's grave.

The church-door was open. I entered, and passed up the aisle, stopping to study once more the dim old fresco above the chancel-arch, which, ever since I could remember anything, had possessed for me such potent attraction. It was much the same to me now as it had ever been—veiled, indistinct, inscrutable, with clouds of crimson and blue, flecks of gold, and mere suggestions of outline. I could comprehend it no more than of old—less perhaps, for childish fancy no longer came to help me.

"I often try to make out what it means," said a soft sweet voice. Rachel stood beside me.

An autumn sun shed rays of bright warm orange light upon the wall.

"Sometimes it seems all so clear to me; and then again, sometimes, I can understand nothing of it. But surely there, high up, do you see Duke? is a cross, with a golden glory about it. And is not this a crown of thorns? May it not be an allegory of Life, Duke? Are not these good angels and

interceding saints? And here dark clouds—shrouding strange forms, that may be Sin, and Suffering, and Despair? But see above them nobler figures—that seem to soar, and yet to lead on, and invite by their example—Religion perhaps—or this, with trailing draperies, to which I fancy I see hands clinging, might be Hope—and this Love—might it not be so, Duke? But all is so clouded—the poor picture has been so badly treated, one can but guess at what the painter meant. That's true of Life, too, perhaps. Is not that Love, Duke? Or is it only an idle fancy of mine? There, the sunshine's gone, and I see nothing now, but mist, and spots, and obscurity. Yet I know there's meaning behind. And there's always Love in the world—that we may not doubt."

We passed out of the church and stood just beyond the dark shadow of the great yew-tree.

"Always Love in the world," I repeated. "Does it never lie buried in the grave?"

"Can it ever wholly die? For a while it changes, and turns to sorrow."

"And sorrow fades?"

"Yes, it needs must. Yet it does not depart from us. We could not wish that—for sorrow is indeed something to prize. It teaches us so much

—to endure—to trust—to believe. But why do I tell this to you, who know it all so well already? For you have sorrowed deeply, Duke, have you not? you and yours. To lament—but not to repine—is not that our simple duty? And Hope comes to our aid—and the beautiful world spreads out before us to comfort and cheer—assuring us that there is work to do and a life to live here and hereafter. How lovely the fields look with the golden sun shining fully on them! How peaceful it is here! What a soft sweet breeze blows over the down!”

We stood for a moment in silence beside Tony's grave. Then we moved to the lych gate, and remained there awhile looking out, over the brook towards Purrington.

Something in the tender tranquillity of the scene—something I derived from Rachel's words, spoken as they had been with the utmost simplicity of thought, moved and encouraged me towards a step I had long contemplated, yet feared to take.

Yet sooner or later I knew it must be taken. I nerved myself to take it then—with a suddenness that was a matter of wonder to me at the time, and for a long while afterwards.

And then I told her as simply and briefly as I

could—but indeed it was not a very convenient time for picking and choosing forms of expressions—how dear she was to me, how long and how fondly I had loved her. And I besought her to become my wife.

She seemed startled, frightened even. For a moment I feared that I had forfeited her good opinion, that I had shocked her by the suddenness of my address; that indeed she thought almost scornfully of me for loving her, her estimate of her own worth being so modest. Then came a quivering smile upon her lips, a bright flush upon her cheeks, her eyes sparkled beneath their trembling lids; she leant her head upon my breast, her soft little hand nestled in mine; and I knew that she was won. I kissed her for the first time.

“When did you first begin to love me?” she asked presently.

“From the first moment of my seeing you.”

“Is that true, Duke? But it is true; because you say it, and because I like to think it true.”

“And you, Rachel, dearest—you began to think of me, and to care for me—when?”

“My dear, I liked you from the first—when you came into the drawing-room in Golden-square—what a while ago! You remember?”



"Of course I remember. Can I ever forget? And when did the liking turn to love?"

"How can I tell you? Does one ever know that? I liked—I could not own even to myself—I did not dare—I was too much ashamed—that I loved! But when you went away—you will never know how my heart sank within me. And when letters came from you—with just a sweet little message to me—or hint of remembrance of me—squeezed in at the end, now and then——"

"Always, Rachel."

"Well, always—it was always—my dear—I was in a fever till I knew how you were—what you were doing—when you would be home again. My hand trembled so, it set all the breakfast things chattering. I began to think—to fear, then—that I loved you. For how was I to know that you cared for me?"

"You might have been sure. But, first, you began to like me for Tony's sake?"

"Of course. You were so kind to him, and my poor boy loved you so."

"And then, afterwards?"

"Don't ask me; for how can I answer? I liked you—I loved you for his sake—for mine—for your own. What does it matter? I love you,

Duke; you may be sure of that, and you are sure. I love you—because I love you. Surely, you don't want a better reason?"

After that we turned homewards, walking quietly, and I must say very slowly, over the down to the farm.

From a far-off field, old Reube—pitching hurdles as usual—hailed us and waved his hat wildly in the air. It was mere chance. He could have known nothing of what had happened. Certainly he could not have seen me kiss Rachel as I helped her over the style. Yet it was a pleasant tribute to my happiness, of which, indeed, all nature seemed to be thoroughly aware. Never did the sun set more brilliantly and joyously upon a more superb landscape. The very birds knew it—the dogs in the yard—the cattle in the meadows—and even, I do believe, the pigs in their styes.

My mother met us at the garden-gate, her pale worn face lit up with smiles and congratulations. She knew all long before we came near enough to tell her.

My uncle upset his snuff-box in his haste to pat me on the back, shake hands with me, and clasp Rachel in his arms.

We were all very happy.

And so I close these passages in the life of  
YOUNG MR. NIGHTINGALE.

Other trials and troubles and grave experiences  
I underwent—for what human life has ever been  
without these? But further there is no need for  
me to recount.

Through all my beloved Rachel was by my  
side, ever cheering and sustaining me with her  
tender love, her firm faith, the unexampled sweet-  
ness and purity of her nature.

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